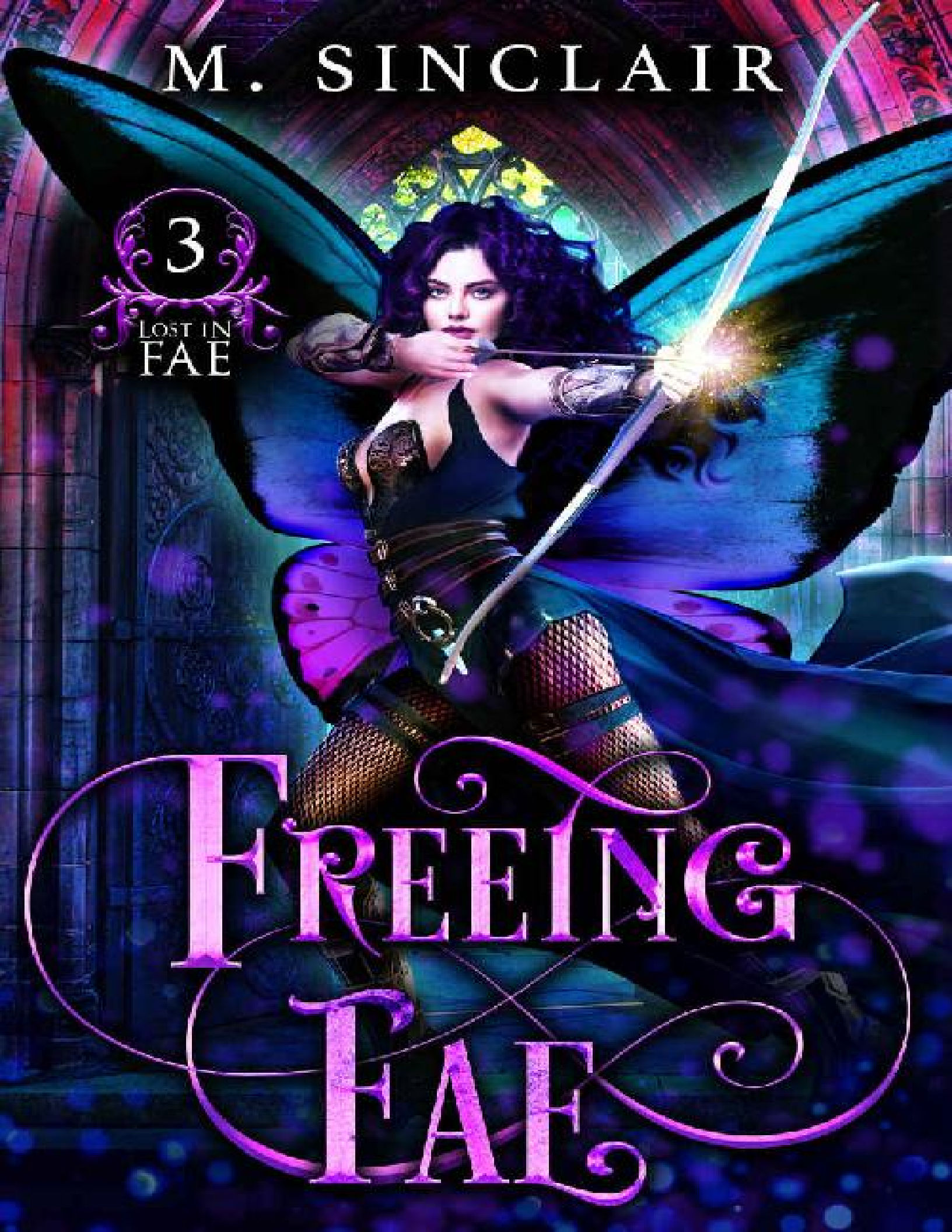
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3
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CONTENTS

Description
Glossary

1. Zed
2. Maize
3. Chait
4. Maize
5. Charm
6. Maize
7. Maize
8. Valerio
9. Valerio
10. Maize
11. Philip
12. Maize
13. Maize
14. Cannon
15. Maize
16. Maddox

Epilogue

Afterword
M. Sinclair
Published Works
Stalk me… really, I'm into it.

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DESCRIPTION

My name is Maize.
Poisonous to the touch.
The bastard child of one very dead Dark Fae King.
A refugee of a war that freed me from my three-year imprisonment.
Captured by one of the monsters that haunted my nightmares each night.

I may have been free, but I would never forget the torture I'd gone through at the hands of my father's guard. It seemed they hadn't forgotten either. Except now it wasn't just me at risk—no, it was the Horde and everyone I'd come to love. Individuals I would protect, even if it meant sacrificing myself.

Hopefully they would forgive me for what I had to do to free Fae.

Freeing Fae is #3 in the ***Lost In Fae*** series. This PNR/Fantasy RH is part of the M. Sinclair Horde universe but can be read as a standalone series (feel free to check out the others as well for a more encompassing understanding of the universe and cameos).

Book will contain swearing. As well, please be advised that the book contains darker themes including assault, PTSD, and violence. Additionally, sexual themes are suitable for mature audiences +18. Burn level - slow/medium.

Freeing Fae will end on a cliffhanger. Lost in Fae #4 is available for pre-order.

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GLOSSARY

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1. *Allons nous coucher maintenant, tu as l'air épuisé:* Let's go to bed now you look exhausted.

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CHAPTER 1

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ZED

Pain exploded across my skin and jolted my nervous system as a hiss broke from my clenched teeth. It was completely possible that I would end up breaking my jaw at this point with how hard it was clenched. Motherfucker, that hurt like hell.

Laughter sounded around me, and I knew that this had absolutely nothing to do with their beliefs, despite their words. No, this was about pain and subjecting those who they deemed as 'different' to literal torture. I was nearly positive that this type of action was a staple of human nature at this point. Unfortunately for me, it wasn't in my nature, so I hadn't been expecting this bullshit.

"It's not enough," a masculine voice spit out in a harsh demand. "A sinner like him doesn't deserve to live. He has followed in the shadow of Satan himself, changing his body to represent a monster of old to worship their gods."

I frowned at that. Were they really doing this because they thought I was a follower of their enemy 'Lucifer' or whatever? That was fairly laughable because I'd been to the Demonic realm, and no type of creature exists.

Although, I was a bit offended that they were saying I looked like a monster of old—I was born this way, assholes. Then again, I was part demonic, so I suppose it did stand to reason that I scared the hell out of them… And honestly, I loved it. Just a bit more than I should.

Still, to compare me to Satan? The big baddie of Christianity? Damn, that was giving me a lot of credit, considering all I'd done was rip out the throat of a human in their town. It hadn't been underserved, either!

Maker. My teammates were going to kill me. Not only was I now late to our real mission here on Earth realm, but I'd gone and gotten myself caught by these cult-like idiots.

Note to self: never help humans.

"You should be thankful." I groaned and then barked out a pained laugh as I felt a knife come down on my thigh. Shit.

I suppose that was better than the one on my side. One that I was nearly positive had punctured something it shouldn't have. Luckily, my magic was keeping up on my healing, even if it left me with no energy to escape.

Although it wasn't helping my ability to prove to them that I was 'normal' by any stretch of the imagination. Then again, humans were vicious little fuckers, so they had probably just been looking for an excuse. After all, these seemed like the type that claimed they were doing shit for the good of all.

That was almost a trademark of bad people.

"We do not thank demons!" Someone grasped my hair and ripped my head back. It snapped against the table, making me roll my eyes.

I groaned, hoping that this would end soon. I could only handle so much before I decided that all of their throats deserved to be ripped out.

Or their spines. I may even offer them the option to choose.

"No, seriously." I spit out blood from where one of them had hit me earlier, the blood seeping into my mouth, "How the hell am I the bad guy? Because I used my pointy teeth to kill him? He was literally going to kill all of you dumb motherfuck—"

"You must have possessed him!" An angry voice growled as a red, almost purple furious face appeared above me. "Never again will you do something so sinister—bring me the brand!"

Shit. That sounded like it may leave a permanent mark.

"Why the hell would I possess him?" I chuckled. "I can't even—fucking hell."

The brand sizzled against my chest, right in the damn middle of it, as the smell of burning flesh filled the space around me. My lips pressed into a smile as I focused up on the ceiling of the church above me, refusing to express how much it hurt, as the images of angels mocked me from above.

Angels were assholes, so I had no idea why the hell they worshipped them.

"You wanted to infiltrate us!"

Can we say paranoid*? Maker. See, I couldn't even fully blame them, because I had been cocky enough to believe that I could deal with whatever they wanted to do with me and had found their attempt to capture me amusing.*

But they were stronger than I expected, and now I was actually restrained and in enough pain that my ability to break out was far more limited than I expected. Yet my sadistic side still was fairly curious how this would pan out.

Also, why the need to brand me with fucking religious symbols? That seemed so goddamn excessive.

"What is that?!" A voice screamed as the door crashed in.

"That would be Lord Lucifer himself," I goaded as Valerio's magic filled the space. I could practically hear my team captain rolling his eyes.

What?! I thought it was funny.

The humans scrambled to create distance, falling on the floor, destroyed by their own terror that I was finding somewhat amusing. Valerio appeared above me, and I flashed him a smile, authentically happy to see him. "Hey, bud."

He sighed and shook his head. "I don't need to tell you that this was an idiotic choice, right?"

"Worth it."

I had been at a very different point in my life when all of that had occurred. Still, I was no stranger to pain. In fact, until recently, I had somewhat sought it out. Okay… there was no 'somewhat' to it. I was a goddamn junkie when it came to both pain and adrenaline. I had a serious problem.

It was one of many reasons that some fucked-up part of me had instantly been attracted to Maize, outside of her being this stunning, underworld-like angel. Avenging and dark, with a soul to match.

The part of me that contained no rationality and all instinct had known exactly what it was doing when we nearly attacked her that first day. We had known how dangerous she was, and I had still tried to approach her and even bite her as if she wasn't. I should have been horrified by how I'd acted…

But honestly, I hadn't been.

I had been more pissed at the need surging through me, even after I stormed off. I had sworn off acting impulsively like that for years now, the brands and extra tattoos I'd added on my body a reminder of the pain it could lead to. What that type of behavior could result in. But Maize pulled away all that and instead left me at my base, predatory instincts.

I'd been so angry at her. Angry that she had stripped me bare and left me vulnerable and weakened. It was like I was eighteen again. The difference now was not that I'd grown immune to it, but instead that I knew she would never abuse it. Maize wasn't like that. In fact, she would be completely uncomfortable if she ever knew how much power she held over me. I knew that for a goddamn fact.

Despite feeling a bit ashamed of my past and my lack of control, I was also thankful because of everything I'd been through. Thankful that I felt no fear when it came to the pain we were about to face.

But the part that did bother me? The aspect that absolutely infuriated me? That Maize would suffer through any of it. *Shit was different when my angel was involved.*

When I'd looked death in the eye again and again, seeking sadistic thrill after sadistic thrill, hoping that I would reach that cliff where everything went to hell… I'd done so willingly. I had wanted to reach the point where I just didn't come back. Not because I wanted my life to end, but because I objectively had nothing to lose. Besides my brothers, I had known no one would ever miss me.

I wasn't positive that was true anymore.

I think Maize might miss me if I was gone, and I sure as fuck would miss her if anything happened. *Miss* wasn't the right word. I would probably go absolutely nuclear if that occurred. There was a lot I could handle, but not that. Never that. Because I knew the truth of how I felt about Maize.

I loved her.

I loved her despite the vulnerability I felt around her and the control she had over my magic…or maybe because of it. And while I didn't know a lot about relationships, I knew you didn't let the woman you loved get kidnapped. You sure as fuck didn't let her be around the bastards who'd just walked into our makeshift prison, and what I feared to be a torture space.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." Maize's voice was strained and choked, her face somehow managing to turn pale despite hanging upside down, her normally

blue eyes practically sheets of glass. Despite the blood rushing to her head from her position, she looked completely unaffected. Well, unaffected by her physical position. She sure as fuck wasn't unaffected by the men that walked in.

I followed her line of sight, having already spotted the motherfucker who was most likely the cause of this as he strode towards us, looking elated. But what had Maize blanching was the individual behind him. One I didn't recognize, and that made me extremely uneasy. I could deal with threats easily, but not ones I didn't know anything about… and if it was one that had the power to frighten my mate, well, I had a feeling we may be in over our heads.

"Now isn't this a sight." David nearly preened, his voice happy as he smiled proudly. As if he had been the one to kidnap us, which I was recognizing had not been the case. The magic had been completely different than anything I'd felt before… so I was assuming it was his accomplice who'd actually taken us. You know, the one Maize seemed petrified of.

He continued. "The almighty commander, hanging upside down next to his bitch. Zed, I am almost disappointed you didn't see this coming."

I was as well.

David looked between the two of us as fury boiled inside of me, the hooks digging deeper into my skin. I nearly ripped myself down from them just to get the motherfucker to look away from Maize, who he was now approaching. She wasn't paying attention though, her eyes on the man by the door, any emotions completely gone from her face. Voided. As if they'd never existed in the first place.

Maker. I hated that. We had worked so damn hard to get her to come out of her shell and make her comfortable, and now…now this. Fuck.

"Ah, *Maize*, I see you recognize my friend," David growled as her eyes flickered to him and then back to the asshole near the door. "He was the one who suggested this particular way of restraining you. A bit barbaric in my mind, but that's the way of you Dark Fae, isn't it?"

"I just bet he did." Her voice was a low whisper, laced in so much pain that it was startling in comparison to the lack of emotion on her face.

The cold wind rattled against the door as the other man walked into the dim light of the room, the abandoned barn-like space creaking from the force of the weather outside. I frowned, realizing the other man was in an SE uniform. *What the hell was going on?*

“Angel.” My voice was soft as she looked at me and then looked back at the bastard. “Who is that?” *I didn’t care if they heard us*.

“Zagan.” Her voice was cold as the large bastard walked up to stand next to David, completely overshadowing him as he watched Maize with what could only be described as captivation.

“My pretty little bug, I’ve missed you.” Zagan smiled before looking at me with disgust. “I see you’ve been misbehaving in my time away, and with hybrids at that. I hope your pure blood hasn’t been tainted by them.”

A sneer filled my face as I realized what his words implied. The claim he was attempting to make on Maize, as if their past could have been anything dark and fucked up. As if he wasn’t part of the problem. I don’t know how they were involved, but it was clear Maize hated him. She was nearly trembling with fury.

But also fear, and I fucking hated that part.

“What are you doing, Zagan? You should have recognized when you lost. The Dark Fae are gone. Any that are left have recognized the truth of what a piece of shit my father was. You lost—start acting like it,” she hissed quietly. As I processed her words, my eyes widened in realization.

This guy was Dark Fae…wearing an SE uniform. Shit.

“You didn’t think I would actually let you go, did you? We never finished our little game,” he mused, moving closer.

“You’re part of SE now?” Maize’s gaze turned colder and more calculating. I was glad she was asking questions, because I was trying to figure out a way to get out of these holds and get her as far away as possible.

“Don’t tell them anything,” David demanded. “You wanted her here in payment for what I have planned, and here she is. Now I need what you promised. I have to lay low until all of this happens.”

The Dark Fae let out a hum of agreement, but I immediately cut in. “You’re running, David?” My smile grew. “I always knew you were a pussy.”

“Fuck you,” David spit. “I wouldn’t have to go anywhere if it wasn’t for you guys. That’s fine though; it won’t be a problem. Zagan will take care of both of you, and then our plan will come into play.”

Yeah. That sounded like a goddamn problem.

Before David left, he flicked his hand, and I groaned as a dagger of ice formed from the water dripping down the wall flew and stabbed me in the

thigh. *Motherfucker.* I cursed as he laughed and looked at Maize.

"All you had to do was leave, bitch, and I would have never handed you over to this sadistic motherfucker. Hell, I may have even made sure you landed somewhere safe if you had sucked my dick."

"Fuck you, David," Maize growled. "You are a little boy, playing a game with people who are using you."

David's face flushed, but Zagan offered him a look before handing him a small orb, similar to the kind used to portal.

He had the ability to make those? Was that something all pure fae could do? Clearly not, since Maize hadn't been able to. Which meant that Zagan was extremely powerful or…no, that was about it actually.

Before David left, I growled out, "Just remember, David—no matter where you go, we will find you."

His face turned white as paper as he eyed me with fear before practically running from the room. That's fine. I would find him. I would also make sure before I killed him that I cut off his dick and shoved it down his own throat so he would shut the fuck up while dying. He seemed like someone who would cry and beg for mercy. Mercy he would never receive from my hand.

"Now that he's gone"—Zagan grabbed a chair and pulled it out, sitting down facing us as blood began to ooze out of my cut—"we can play."

"Why are you in SE?" Maize demanded.

"Because I need to be here, and that's all you need to know, my pretty little bug." He grinned. "Because what happened to our kingdom won't be forgotten."

"I'm not sure what you plan to accomplish." Maize's voice went cold. "You can't touch me." Her words sounded hollow, and her gaze was distanced, as if she was living a nightmare. As if she was suffering through extreme PTSD…which is exactly what was happening.

"You're right, I can't. Unless you allow it."

"Fuck that," I spit out.

"Why the hell would I do that?" she growled.

"Because if not, he is going to be the one suffering."

Fuck. I would have happily taken torture, but it was clear this asshole knew Maize well, because instantly her face filled with sadness and resignation.

"No, Maize," I snarled.

I'd been through torture enough to know that this asshole had done a number on her, and I refused to have that repeated in any way, shape, or form. Endless hours of pain. The burning of flesh as she was branded by iron chains that kept her tethered to her imprisonment for three years. I didn't care what I had to do—she wouldn't suffer like that anymore. We had promised to keep her safe.

"I can't control it like that," she whispered.

"Liar. I know everything about you, little bug, and I plan on breaking your wings until you are nothing without me. So either you are going to do that with him alive or him dead. I am not partial, and I think it would be fun to watch him bleed out. Do you think the blood mage will crave his own blood as it drips down?"

"Fuck you," she choked out, her voice breaking.

I knew he saw it, and while I loved the emotion that she had towards me…this was really, really bad. I needed to reach out to Valerio through our team bond, but I could feel absolutely nothing, which made me fear that distance had severed it. I had absolutely no idea where we were, so even if I could reach him, I would be of zero fucking help. I eyed Zagan, wondering what I could do to convince him to let me down from here, even if it was so he could 'kill' me. Something I would be completely fine with him doing, for the record, if it meant saving Maize…but I had a feeling I would be a bit more useful alive right now.

Plus, I needed to exact my vengeance on this bastard. He had hurt my mate and deserved worse than death. I didn't want to consider what he'd done to leave that haunted expression on Maize's face, the pure fear there.

"How did you get away from us?" I asked. When we had attacked the Dark Fae, freed the prisoners, and easily taken over the kingdom, we had come across several of the guards that had managed to survive the initial attack. Of course, they'd been immediately placed in a restricted prison by the SE Guard.

Clearly SE had more problems than we realized.

"Made a deal." His smile grew. "Funny how none of the Horde members can actually recognize Dark Fae magic, isn't it? It's as if the war never happened. No, all I had to do was approach Richard Flank, tell him I would be able to give him all the power he wanted, throne included, and he handed over everything…including his own daughter." His gaze turned

dark. “What was the girl’s name again? I didn’t ask when I pinned her down and forced—”

“Shut the fuck up.” Maize tried to surge forward, her skin sizzling as fury shook the space around her.

Fuck. He was talking about Brielle. That was…that was just another reason to rip this bastard’s spine out. I had to focus on that later, though, because my bloodlust was clouding my ability to think.

Zagan’s chuckle filled the space, and I found myself hating the sick sense of satisfaction he was getting out of her reactions. “Don’t be jealous, Maize—I thought of you the entire time. Besides, she cried far too much—”

“I am going to kill you, Zagan. I am going to rip and cut off every single part of your body until you are absolutely nothing except a bloody torso hanging on the castle’s dungeon wall. Then I am going to let every single person you’ve hurt drag what’s left of your body around the Horde like a flag of goddamn victory.”

Holy fuck. Maize’s voice was so soft it sent chills up my spine, and I found myself both getting turned on and a bit terrified at her words.

Although, that wasn’t all that surprising for me.

Zagan’s eyes narrowed. “Unlikely, little bug. But if you want bloody foreplay, all you have to do is ask.”

Maize cried out as the iron suddenly tightened on her and cut into her skin, creating deep, branded gashes. I let out a roar of frustration, and Zagan just smiled at me, seemingly thrilled at my anger. I was trying so goddamn hard to keep my cool and figure out a way out of this, but I was failing. I was failing Maize.

He continued as if nothing was wrong.

“Anyway, David walked in on me with Brielle and told me he’d like to talk. He knew what I was, and I realized he was far more intelligent than his uncle. Of course, I was intrigued, and when he explained how weak his own uncle was, I decided to make a deal with the boy instead.” He waved a hand.

“Why?” This asshole was so confident we would never leave here.

“The throne for them,” he explained with a smile tugging at his lips. “And a new kingdom for the Dark Fae. After all, there is no need for impure blood in the Fae lands. This place was a mistake to begin with. A disgusting mutation.”

“A coup? You are going to try to take Gray’s throne?” Maize barked out a laugh. It *was* actually fairly hilarious, to be fair.

“Shut it,” he snapped. “Enough talking, little bug. Now, are you going to let me torture you, or is your lover going to suffer?”

“Do not touch her.” My voice was even despite hanging upside down with an icicle in my thigh, water and blood streaming down my chest and cheek as it slowly melted.

“Oh, but she’s mine to touch,” he goaded. “Don’t you remember, Maize?”

Maize looked even paler, her words seeming stuck in her throat as she tried to whisper something. I talked over her and offered him a goading smile. “Interesting. I didn’t seem to feel any of that when I was with her last night.”

“Zed,” she choked.

I groaned as his fist collided with my face, sending me soaring back as my skin tore slightly in the hooks. I knew. I absolutely knew I was asking for it, but every second his attention was on me was a second that it wasn’t on Maize.

“You touched her?!” he growled.

“More than touched.” I smiled, feeling blood filling my mouth. “I fucked her three times… or was it more? But each time, you know what I heard? My name, not yours, asshole.”

When his power surged through me in a dangerous electrical current, I just knew that I was going to be different after this shit. It was worth it though. To protect Maize? It was absolutely goddamn worth it.

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CHAPTER 2

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MAIZE

"No!" My voice cracked as I screamed out for Zagan to stop.

Of course it didn't work. In fact, I could nearly see the pleasure Zagan took in ignoring my plea as he looked back at me with a sickening smile. A pained sound broke from my throat as he put a hand to Zed's shoulder and pulsed sickly dark fae magic through my blood mage's system, causing him to convulse.

The movement was so rough and jolted that the hooks that were keeping him secured tore his skin open as he broke away from them, his body swinging back and forth, suspended by the ankles only now.

I wasn't new to blood, but fuck, that seemed like a lot of it.

Mercury tears streamed down my face as the scent of his blood filled the space, causing me to nearly hyperventilate. No. No. No. Outside of the severe PTSD this was causing, I could not lose Zed. That concept was inconceivable to me.

"Again?" Zagan's voice was nearly a purr as he once again shot black lightning bolts of magic through him, Zed's roar of pain causing me to tremble with fury and a sensation that shook me to my core. I'd never felt so damn helpless in my life, restrained by iron and shackled by the same person that had tormented me for so many years.

"This is fucking nothing." Zed spit blood out as he eyed Zagan.

"Ignore him!" My voice cracked as the Dark Fae looked towards me. "Please, you know it doesn't matter what he's saying—"

"Sorry angel face," Zed interrupted me, his jaw tight as he ignored my attempts to save him, "but he was going to find out eventually that you were

no longer his to claim.” He turned back to Zagan. “In fact, it wasn’t just me that took her—”

I screamed as Zagan pulsed power through him again, causing his eyes to flutter as his entire body convulsed. There was no way that my other mate bonds wouldn’t be alerted to this type of pain. Not just physically, but emotionally. *They would feel it and find us.* They had to, because if they didn’t, we were fucked.

Zagan had always been different, more than just a Dark Fae, and I knew it was because he’d taken part in my father’s experiments in draining magic. It had allowed him to be powerful by taking in magic that wasn’t natural to him, but far worse, it had the unintended effect of him being able to drain others’ magic as well. It was no wonder I hadn’t originally sensed him—his magic smelled completely different. Like old fae magic. Far older than anything I’d ever experienced.

Had it been him that had kidnapped me that night? The magic felt the same as the one he was using now and the kind that’d appeared in the forest seconds before Zed and I were taken. But why would he have left me there? Had he meant to kill me?

No, Zagan would never make it that goddamn easy on me.

There was something far larger at play here.

I couldn’t think of that right now though. Mostly because it meant that I had to consider a rumor that I’d given no thought to at the time. One that meant Zagan had taken a piece of my father’s own magic inside of him, allowing him to become this powerful. This type of monster. It meant that in some way, my father was still alive.

Except when I looked in Zagan’s eyes, I didn’t see my father, or even the guard that tortured me. No, there was something far darker there, and it made me wonder what exactly this bastard had gotten himself involved in.

Whatever it was, I hoped it killed him.

The worst part of all this? I knew Zagan wasn’t using his ability to drain magic yet. No, this was simply him just toying with Zed and me. The man had a dark, deep level of depravity, and we were just beginning the game. A game that we possibly wouldn’t win. A game that could change, if not kill us.

Even my familiars were paralyzed under the effect of the iron and seething with anger at how my mate was being treated, despite not being able to do anything about it. Not only did the iron not allow me to use my

magic, but there was something about Zagan's magic this time around that halted my magic almost completely, simply by its presence. That alone would have been horrible, but soon he would begin draining mine slowly, siphoning it as I grew weaker. I knew I soon wouldn't have a choice but give into his twisted games, especially if I was going to try to save Zed. Which I had to do. I couldn't lose the insane bastard.

I wanted to hit Zed for what he was doing, but I also wanted to hug him. Kiss the pain away from him, because I knew without a doubt that he was only saying this shit to distract Zagan. "Is that true?" Zagan snapped in a low growl, walking towards me, his face distorted through my tears. "Did you let them touch you, my little bug?"

He reached forward, swiping a tear from the air and putting it on his tongue. It looked like it turned him on, which was so fucked up.

"Yes," I whispered. "But it was me. I pursued them."

His face went blank, before a malice-filled sneer formed and he snarled, "Fucking slut. That shouldn't even surprise me. You were always trying to whore yourself out with the other guards."

Right. What a motherfucker.

An idea came to my head, a way to distract him, watching his maniac gaze completely focused on me. "Zagan, I just lost my way—"

"Maize," Zed bit out.

Zagan lashed out, and Zed let out a bark of almost sadistic laughter as his body convulsed, blood from the punch and the injury on his leg making him look actually rather horrifying. The Dark Fae walked back toward me, tilting his head curiously at my words, as if he wasn't torturing my blood mage.

"What was that, my little bug?" he asked softly. My breathing was rough as I tried to not get stuck in memories focused on him.

"I just lost my way," I whispered. "I promise that's all it was. Zed—"

"Don't you dare say his name." He gripped my hair and I whimpered, my magic boiling under my skin. I was partly terrified of lashing out because I didn't want to hurt Zed, but I also knew that it would probably hurt Zagan and allow us a chance to escape. I just needed him to let down his guard for a moment…

"Okay, okay." My eyes darted over to Zed, who looked halfway to being knocked out at this point. I didn't blame him—Zagan's magic was

something to be reckoned with. “I just need you to know it was a mistake. I thought you were gone.”

“I would never leave you; I have created so much for us. Made so many decisions for us and our future.” He tilted his head and then reached a hand forward before stopping. “If you really think it was a mistake, you will let me touch you. Let me punish you for forgetting about who you belong to.”

“Angel,” Zed growled, his voice raspy.

I cried out Zagan’s name as he turned towards Zed, making him snap back to look at me, his eyes turning heated.

“Yes?” he asked, his voice raspy.

“Of course you can touch me,” I whispered, knowing there was no way out of this. I felt tears well in my eyes, but this was the only way to keep Zed safe and not dead, because I absolutely had no doubt Zagan would kill him if necessary.

I didn’t know what his version of necessary was, and I didn’t want to risk my blood mage accidentally pushing him to that point.

“Really?” His eyes lit up. “You will let me take away your ability to fight back? Let me punish you before I make you mine?”

Fuck. When he said it like that…

“Don’t you fucking dare, Maize,” Zed growled.

“Yes,” I whispered, keeping Zagan’s full attention as a dark smile filled his face, making shivers break out across my skin.

“Do it. Now,” he demanded almost in a challenging tone.

I closed my eyes as he pressed a hand to my head. My magic tried to lash out, but I kept it restrained, knowing he would kill Zed. I felt my entire body go slack as he suddenly invaded every nerve ending of my body, and an electric current had me trembling as Zed screamed my name and my eyes went shut. He yanked at my power, and like a plug opening, began to drastically drain it.

Poisonous memories invaded my consciousness, from before my father had even started torturing me, when Zagan had first started noticing me…

A knock sounded on my door. My wings shut, my face fell, now void of the small amount of happiness I’d felt at the game I’d been playing with several butterflies in my window. Almost instantly

they flew away, and I frowned at the feel of the magic on the other side of the door. My father's.

"Dad?" I asked, walking over to the door, tilting my head curiously.

Over the years, my relationship with my father had grown tenuous, and at nearly eighteen, I barely recognized the man. I almost never saw him anymore, and whenever I did he seemed…off. Most of the time he was pushing me onto tutors or locking me in my room.

I couldn't remember if the man had ever loved me, but he certainly didn't now. Also, he treated my half-brother like total shit, and while I wasn't a huge fan of Victor, I still thought it was horrible. So what stopped me from taking action against him? My own insecurities? My own fears? I didn't like the man at all, but he was the only family I had…so there was something to be said about that. Right? I hoped so, because if not, I had no reason to put up with his behavior.

"Maize." My father stood in the doorway, looking at me expectantly. "Are you ready to go?"

My eyes moved over his shoulders to a massive, dark-haired man standing behind him. He had to be a few years older than myself, and he should have been handsome, but everything about him felt wrong. Twisted.

The way he was staring at me made me feel uncomfortable, and I looked back towards my father, feeling like I was under some type of clinical observation. Like a bug.

"Yes," I murmured, glad that after today I would be considered somewhat of an adult. Well, not in my father's eyes, of course, but then again, he wasn't aware of what I was capable of. If he was, he wouldn't be holding me a birthday celebration. No, he would be keeping me locked up in the dungeon.

"Let's go." He ushered me forward, and I eyed the man again as I snuck past. As we walked down the hallway, one of my father's advisors joined us and they walked ahead, leaving me with the man that made me so damn uncomfortable.

When I tried to take a step forward, his hand came around my bicep, causing me to jolt away. I stared up at him, feeling panicked. I knew exactly what could happen when someone touched me without me expecting it.

"Do not touch me," I bit out quietly.

His smirk was dark. "Don't walk ahead of me, Princess. I need to make sure you stay safe."

Somehow I didn't think my safety was what he had in mind.

The memories quickly cascaded into far more painful ones...

"Pretty little bug." Zagan's voice came out cold and harsh, raising me from my sleep as his fingers gripped the bars of my cell. I opened my eyes and let out a shaky breath, offering him a dark look.

"Zagan." My voice was rough. "What do you want?"

My eyes were half closed, swollen from the treatment less than twelve hours ago. My body curled into itself as I eyed him, wondering what he had planned for me. I swear, the more freedom my father gave him, the more focus he put on me instead of the other prisoners.

"You," he growled, his eyes flashing dark as he tilted his head. The man was pure poison. Everything about him was dark and tainted.

"You can't have me," I explained softly.

Suddenly, his anger lashed out, lighting up the metal cage with electricity as it hit me and made me convulse. I fell forward, the iron bars catching me and sizzling my skin as my wings tried to break out. I whimpered, hearing him walk into the cage as he tactfully stayed out of my grasp. When I looked up, he was crouched in front of me, his eyes crawling over my body that was covered only by a threadbare dress.

"Maize." His voice was a soft purr. "I can convince your father to go easier on you. Maybe move you out of these cages—"

No he couldn't. My father hated me.

I couldn't deny that something had changed between the two of them though. They had a stronger relationship than before, and their magic had a similar thread of energy underneath what I'd originally recognized. It scared me, the concept of what they would have had to do in order to gain this type of magic and power. More so, what it meant for me and the pain I would have to endure.

"But you have to give me something," he growled. "You have to give me you."

“Zagan”—my lips pressed up as his eyes heated—“I would rather be fucking gutted than ever have you touch me.” Which between the electric shocks and the draining of my magic, wasn’t exactly a far cry.

Zagan’s face turned stone cold. “You may just get your goddamn wish.”

His hand came down on the metal chains near me, and the shock was so violent, I passed out. My entire consciousness went dark, and I knew when I woke up I would be faced with more pain than I knew what to do with.

“Wake up, my pretty little bug.” Zagan’s hand squeezed my jaw hard enough that it pulled me from my dazed unconsciousness. My breathing was rough and uneven, my body trembling in aftershocks of his torture.

It was also damn clear I was no longer upside down. No, I was on my back looking up at the ceiling as everything seemed to warp in and out of proportion. Fear soared through me as I realized Zagan was on top of me, my magic seemingly completely drained. He was rolling my power completely. When the hell had he gotten so powerful?

When I stared into his eyes, I saw something staring back at me that terrified me. It wasn’t him, and it sure as hell wasn’t my father. No, this was something ancient observing me in a way that made me physically sick. I’d seen a lot of evil and darkness in my life, but this was something else entirely.

“Zagan, what are you doing?” I whimpered as his grip tightened on my throat and his other hand assaulted my breast, causing a growl to break from my throat. *Oh hell no.* Anger began to boil defensively under my skin, and I saw his eyes flare with surprise at my magic growing once again. Zagan didn’t realize how powerful I’d become, and not just because of my familiars, either.

No, I was no longer the same woman I’d been in that dungeon, and despite agreeing to let him touch me, I found my magic building under the surface, willing me to exert dominance over this asshole.

When he hit me across the face in a harsh slap, I lost my ability to breathe for a minute. Shit. It shouldn’t have hurt more than other shit he was doing, but somehow it did. My cheek stung as I lifted my chin and met his gaze once again.

“Do not growl like an animal,” he spit out. “You are my pretty little bug, so start acting like it.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed as I cried out, something sharp coming down on my hand. I turned my head to find my right arm outstretched, an iron spike through my hand, nailing me down. Before I could stop, he did the next one, and tears leaked down my face, making me realize he was pinning me down like a creepy butterfly exhibit. An insect for his viewing. I tried to move against it, but the iron kept me secured to the cold ground, causing my entire body to tremble in pain.

“You said I could have you, Maize,” he murmured, almost panicked. I felt him tear down my open shirt, causing me to feel uncomfortable and exposed to his seeking gaze. My heart was moving so fast I felt like I was about to pass out.

This was not going to happen. I didn’t care what the hell I had to do, but it was not going down like this.

“Not like this,” I begged, wondering if pleading would work with him.

“You fucking bastard,” Zed growled out, drawing both of our attention. My eyes widened as I realized he was turning nearly black and blue given how much trauma had been inflicted on him. *Holy shit.* Zagan had clearly been torturing him as well. I felt fury soar through me.

“You said you wouldn’t touch him.” My gaze went over every single fucking mark on my mate, causing something dark to lash out in my center, making my body tremble. Not with fear this time. No, this was something far darker.

Zagan laughed. “You think I give a fuck what I promised to you? You little bitch, you do care about him. You whore.”

I groaned as his fingers tightened around my throat and squeezed enough that I nearly blacked out. His voice was angry near my ear. “I’m going to kill him, pretty little bug. I’m going to kill him and then fuck you.”

The threat to Zed’s life had everything inside of me stilling. No. He couldn’t kill Zed. I loved him. *I loved Zed*. That startling realization had everything snapping into focus at once, and his control over me shattered.

It didn’t matter that I almost never attacked offensively or had no skill or real-life experience doing it. No. All that mattered was that my magic had decided that this was enough. We weren’t going to let this shit ever happen again.

My magic, stronger than it had ever been before, exploded out in an array of colors all at once, blinding me. Zagan screamed as his power rebounded back into him, and I felt as his body was flung into the distance somewhere, the house around us shaking. No matter how strong the bastard had grown, it was nothing compared to me. I forced myself to roll over, the iron stakes popping out and my wings expanding as I stood up. My familiars left my body, instantly going to help Zed as I stalked forward to find my prey, wanting him to suffer. *Needing Zagan to suffer.*

I didn't care how injured I was.

I didn't care that blood was soaking my skin and hair.

I didn't care about any of it.

Where the fuck was he? I reached where he had been thrown into the wall of our temporary prison before I looked around and realized he was nowhere in sight. No. He did *not* escape.

"We'll be back for you, Maize." Zagan's voice was dark in the shadows as I felt his magic evaporate. *We?* Who the hell was 'we'? Suddenly, my knees went weak, and I dropped to them in realization that I'd lost my chance. Somehow the fucker had managed to shield himself. He'd escaped, which meant he was still out there, at large. Still dangerous to the people I loved.

I heard a low groan and snapped my head to the side, my eyes widening in panic as I surged forward. My fingers clasped Zed's jaw, finding him pale and his eyes dark as he offered me a small smile from where he was hanging upside down. Holy hell, the man looked like an absolute mess. Every single injury had me feeling a hollow pit of guilt. He was hurt because of me.

"We are trying to break these." Lu's lisped words had me looking up to find that the massive onyx cobra had somehow managed to get himself along the beams that we'd been tied to. His venom was dripping down, causing the iron to hiss, as it landed on the latch that was the weakest part of Zed's confinements. Sy, on the other hand, was using small pieces of web to close up his deep wounds that were bleeding profusely. I honestly… I mean, it was helpful, but holy crap, it was a bit weird.

I couldn't focus on that right now.

"Shit," I murmured, realizing what I was going to have to do. "Zed—"

"Just do it, angel." He offered me an impossibly charming smile, as if he wasn't close to death. "Besides, with how much I love you, I was never

going to let you go anyway. This just makes it so that you can't leave me either."

My eyes welled with tears as I smiled at his insane words. "I love you too."

I loved Zed so much, and I was going to do everything in my power to make sure this never happened again. To make sure no one ever got hurt because of me again.

"Then you better fucking get this shit out of my system," he groaned.

Knowing that I didn't have time to get him down from the chains, I let my wings out and floated up until I was able to give him a soft, upside-down kiss, before trailing my lips against his jaw, both hating and loving the energy I was pulling off of him. I was feeding off the man, and his magic had a hungry bloodlust that was aimed towards me as well. He wanted to drink from me, and I was more than happy to oblige…once I wasn't as worried about him.

When my fangs sliced through his skin and he groaned in both pain and pleasure, I found everything inside of me lighting up. This was exactly why Zed was so damn dangerous to me… I mean, the man loved pain, that much was very clear. But more so, his magic fed off mine in a cycle.

The poison was thick and moving through his veins quickly, but I was able to draw most of it out. I felt everything sag with exhaustion and relief, knowing that my mate was going to live. All too soon, I was falling to the ground, but then, in a fast move, Zed used his regained strength to break his ankles out of the chains that had been weakened and swing down to catch me. I felt high and exhausted, and my body melted into his strong, secure arms and possessive grip.

I could also see the faint outline of a skeleton butterfly on his neck. My mark. My brand. His gaze moved down to my throat, then to my collarbone where I could feel a burning sensation, and before I could do or say anything, everything went dark around me. The last words coming from my lips were another declaration of love.

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CHAPTER 3

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CHAIT

I knew something was wrong the minute my eyes snapped open, sweat dotting my forehead and my breathing rough. It felt like a heavy blanket of energy had been pressing down on my lungs, not allowing me to breathe, and the minute it disappeared I'd awoken. Panic hit me square in the chest, and not because of the horrible nightmare I'd been trapped in, memories from my childhood deciding to make an unwelcome visit.

Ones that featured cages and being held captive by different masters. Ones that featured pain and the stress of constantly being in fight-or-flight mode. Ones that I knew would never fully be gone from my subconscious.

No, this panic had nothing to do with those and everything to do with Maize.

But now, standing here in the middle of our house amongst the chaos of realizing she was missing, I felt *fear* more than panic. *Where the hell was our girl?*

Maize was gone from our house. From our bed. For the first time, I knew that this had nothing to do with her possibly wanting to leave and everything to do with whoever the hell was trying to hurt her.

The same person who would die for what they were putting our girl through, and that wasn't even including if they touched her. If one hair on Maize's head was hurt… No, I couldn't afford to go down that mental path right now. I needed to stay focused until I had her back here, safe and sound. Then I could pay the Spirit realm a visit with the poor bastard who decided it would be a good idea to fuck with my mate.

Maybe Philip wasn't completely off base with the idea of handcuffing her to one of us. She just kept disappearing, and while I knew this wasn't her fault because I could practically feel the dark magic in the air, the occurrence was enough to drive a man to the brink of the limits of sanity. How many times would we allow her to be taken from us before we lost it? We couldn't live this way. We just fucking couldn't.

Right now, the idea of finding her was one of the only rational thoughts I was managing to hang on to. The concept of it permeated everything else as I tried to remain as calm as possible. Calm was the only way we were going to find her, especially without even her scent to help. How had everything gone so wrong so fast?

Maybe she and Zed had decided to take a midnight excursion? Somehow I didn't think we were that lucky though. Someone wanted my love, and they had just plucked her out of existence as if she'd never been in our home, filling the entire space with a strength and warmth that made the world not feel nearly as stark. Maize was the woman that I lived for, and with her gone, we were simply a team of men that had no compass telling us where to go. Everything felt off without her nearby, and not just because of the bond…although I could feel the effects of that as well.

My magic was swirling around in a chaotic storm, so unlike its normal self, and I could feel a prickle of unease at the back of my neck telling me that something was wrong. Our mate was going through something, and for whatever reason our connection was too weak for me to reach out to it naturally.

"I want teams out searching the grounds and the kingdom. We have no idea how long they've been gone. It's very possible they are in danger. If I'm fucking overreacting then so be it, but we all know its not like Zed or Maize to just leave without a word." Valerio's voice filled the house as I looked over at where he stood with Philip and Charm.

Charm looked pale and Philip confused, almost dazed, as they both left the house, following Valerio's orders without argument. Both men seemed nearly as off as I currently felt. My head pulsed in pain as I groaned and looked down at the floor, feeling small electric pulses go through me. *What the hell was that?* I had a really fucking bad feeling about what the pain I was experiencing meant for Maize.

I frowned, trying to let my magic run over every inch of the house, trying to pick up on any signatures outside of the wards that we always had

up. The wards that were impossibly untouched. The only sign of Maize at all was outside, where her and Zed's scents lingered. Everything else appeared as if they'd never been here in the first place.

Maize had fallen asleep with a smile on her face, curled up between us after a movie, and then she somehow managed to get out of the house again without triggering the wards? How?!

I squeezed my fists as my head pulsed again, the sound of a ticking clock in my head warning me that we were reaching a tipping point. I just prayed to the Maker that it wasn't one that meant losing my love. Everything instinctively told me, though, that she was in that much danger. That this situation was that precarious.

My gaze moved from the back wall of the house to the dark, snowy forest that surrounded the property behind the Red Masques Academy. Cannon was out there. He had picked up her and Zed's scent faintly, but it was as if they had just fucking disappeared into thin air. There was also a signature of that odd dark magic that felt almost ancient in nature. It felt wrong, like it no longer belonged here, especially in the Horde.

When Maddox walked in from the back porch, my eyes widened slightly, realizing that he was talking to Cirdan. I mean, I was glad the bastard was here since he seemed to have a better grip on this type of magic than we did, but it always threw me off seeing him. Up until recently, the man never interacted with anyone outside of his team unless he had to. Brielle walked next to him, her chin tilted up but a noticeable shake to her entire frame. I frowned as Maddox offered me a look that had me knowing it wasn't good news.

"Did you sense anything?" Valerio appeared next to me, his gaze critical, but underneath it I saw how worked up he was, and through our team bond I could feel his magic acting up. Valerio was good at solving problems, but I had no idea what would happen once he found Maize… Or even worse, if we couldn't find her.

No. No, I couldn't think that way. We would find her. Find both of them.

Cirdan offered him a cautious look. "The same magic as before. I still don't recognize who it is, just that it's very old magic tinted with possible Dark Fae power."

"You think there are Dark Fae in the Horde besides Maize?" I asked. I noticed the way Cirdan's jaw clenched, Brielle gripping his arm slightly but

keeping her face impassive.

“I think it’s possible,” he answered evenly.

“I recognize the magic.” Brielle’s voice was so soft I almost couldn’t hear her. I didn’t know the young woman, outside of how much Maize had taken a liking to her, but it was clear that she’d been through a lot. I knew what it looked like to have demons—hell, Maize did as well—and this girl had far too many for her age.

“Bri,” Cirdan warned softly. She shook her head.

“It’s fine,” she promised and blinked away wherever her mind had gone. Maddox winced, which was more than enough to make me know it was bad.

“My father recently met with an SE guard whose magic felt different than normal, and I didn’t realize it at the time, but his magic is as Cirdan describes. I think it may be who you are looking for,” she explained diplomatically.

“What did he want when he met with your father?”

“I don’t know,” she answered honestly and then met Valerio’s gaze. “I wasn’t there for that part of the meeting. I was always up in my room whenever he had people over. The only time that I saw anyone was when my father sent them up. If I saw him, I could point him out, but I don’t know anything else about him.” She paused and frowned. “David walked in on us that night, actually. He said he wanted to meet with him…”

I didn’t hear what she was saying fully because I could see that Cirdan was on the edge of violence. I immediately interjected, knowing Maddox would probably be able to fill in any essential details.

“It may be easier for you to write this out, Brielle. Everything you remember,” I suggested, Cirdan’s gaze on the floor in front of him as his magic vibrated in the space, directly contrasting the fabric of the realm itself.

Brielle looked up at Cirdan and nodded. “That may be best. I will let you know if I think of anything else. Please find Maize. If it’s the same person, then she is in far more danger than you know.”

Valerio was staring at Cirdan, and when he spoke I nearly winced, knowing that his words were going to cause a problem. “Cirdan, maybe you should go on a walk. She can stay here and wait until we find Maize—”

“Absolutely fucking not.”

His voice was cold and caused Valerio's magic to amp up, but clearly our captain knew the witch had reached his limit because he sighed and nodded sharply. "Just let us know if you need anything, Brielle—"

And they were gone. Seriously, Cirdan just portalled them out of the room.

I ran a hand over my face. "That is a volatile situation."

Maddox shook his head. "That girl has been through…it's just bad. It's really bad. I know we can't control it, but I worry that if Cirdan ever finds out he could go nuclear."

"We need to stay out of it," Valerio leveled quietly before his jaw clenched. "It will just make it worse. Maize feels protective over the girl, so we will help her with anything she needs, but the best thing we can do is give them a wide berth. I have no intention of getting Cirdan to that point. I can barely control my own goddamn magic right now… Which reminds me —Chait, I need you to try to reach her through the Spirit realm. I can't feel anything from Zed either. If they really are in danger, our timeline is short."

Maddox offered me a look that I tried to not react to. It was clear that Valerio was very close to hitting his limit as well, and while neither Maddox nor I were in a better place, our magic didn't have the same destructive tendencies that his did. Ones that would feed off his own fears of what could be happening to her. I had a feeling Valerio would burn the world trying to find Maize, no matter who burned with it.

I nodded, not bothering to tell them I'd already tried, because if I had to try all night, I fucking would. Valerio nodded sharply and walked towards the front of the house where Philip and Charm had gathered teams.

Maddox crossed his arms, his gaze darting outside as agitation spiked his magic. "You don't think… I mean, she wouldn't run, right?"

"No. Not anymore." I knew that.

"Even after what happened between her and me?" He looked pained. I understood his fear, but I also had confidence in Maize's promise to stay, so if she was gone, it wasn't from her own doing.

"Maddox, she loves us. She didn't leave," I promised him as he offered a sharp nod. I walked towards the couches and shook the weird haze on my magic.

Whoever had repressed our magic had done a damn good job. It also explained why none of us noticed when Maize left the house in a way that was still very much a mystery. There was no way they had taken her from

the house; she would have had to leave. We had a ridiculous amount of wards on this place, and it was frustrating as hell that nothing seemed to trigger them. My hand ran over my chest, practically feeling physical pain in my heart as it had trouble beating because she wasn't near.

I sat down and closed my eyes, pulling on my magic and feeling far stronger now that the haze was gone. I could feel it being siphoned from me, though, and that meant Maize was using it.

I hadn't noticed the subtle drain, but I sure as fuck did now. *Shit.* Did that mean she was hurt? Was that what my magic had been trying to tell me?

I was glad she was taking what she needed from me, but it still scared the hell out of me. What if I wasn't enough? What if between all of us she still wasn't able to sustain herself? What if something irreversible happened? What if I lost her?

No. That wasn't an option.

Diving headfirst into the Spirit realm, a low groan broke from my throat at the metaphysical whiplash. Goddamn it, it hadn't been this hard before. My magic was definitely dwindling.

Pushing past the exhaustion of my power, I focused on finding Maize's life force. Except when I did find it and realized how faint it was…I realized why I had barely recognized it before. *It was nearly nonexistent*.

A harsh breath came out of me as I narrowed in and forced everything around me out of the way so I could find her. So I could pull on the very faint power signature that I could only sense because of how fucking well I was cued into her after all this time. I just had to find her physical location. Nothing else mattered.

I continuously repeated this, again and again, hoping that it would make a difference. My hands were trembling as I kept pulling on the normally vibrant life force that symbolized Maize. *Why was she so damn far away?*

"What do you mean she's far away?" Valerio's voice demanded as I distantly realized I had spoken out loud. I ignored him, continuing to pull on the connection as the string evaporated in my hands again and again, the visibility of it dimming in and out like a poorly lit lantern.

Suddenly, pain slammed into me so hard that I curled over, causing me to let out a hiss of surprise. What the hell? My body was throbbing with a level of agony that I'd never experienced before and then jolting as if I was

being electrocuted and fried on a live wire. My vision blurred, and I felt like my head was about to explode.

Focus, Chait. This pain would all be for nothing if I couldn't find her.

Maddox's hand came down on my shoulder as he surged some of his magic against mine, helping me move forward, the thread just solid enough for me to grasp it fully…

Found her.

I exhaled sharply as a vision of pain, blood, and suffering filled my consciousness. Maize's power exploded out as her wings propelled her off the floor, a dark figure darting out of range as the sickening magic lifted from her space.

I hissed, noting that Zed swung back and forth by his legs, looking as if he'd been tortured. Which considering his state was obviously accurate. When I snapped my head back to my love, I watched as Maize limped over towards him and grasped his face, my eyes widening in the realization that the bastard was dying.

Without thinking, I threw myself into the Spirit realm physically and portalled to where Maize was latched onto my friend's neck. Almost immediately a surge of power went through me as Zed was added to our mate bond, his sadistic dark magic filling the space with chaos. I realized with a start that Maize was the one controlling it. His magic was bending under her will. I solidified right as Maize fell back, her body going limp with exhaustion, and Zed caught her before she cracked her head open.

Her smile was sleepy as she smiled up at him, not noticing me before she knocked out completely. When I met Zed's gaze, I found the man staring at me with a bruised and battered face but a strong, determined expression.

Maize's familiars crawled down from the timbers of the room and returned to her as he finally sagged in exhaustion, his breathing harsh before he wrapped his arms around Maize's waist. I moved forward to help.

"She needs a healer," Zed got out roughly as I helped both of them down onto the floor, my eyes tracing every element of Maize's face. "And then I need to kill that piece of shit."

"Who?" I demanded softly.

"Zagan."

Zed was passed out then, and silence filled the space around us as I tried to process his words. Who was Zagan? How the hell did we protect Maize

from this bastard? How the hell did I get them out of here? For the second time this week, I clutched onto the love of my life, terrified that I was going to lose her.

Why was the woman I loved always bleeding out in my arms?

Closing my eyes, I used all my excess energy to reach out through the Spirit realm to Valerio and Maddox, both of whom were staring wide-eyed at the spot I'd just disappeared from. My phantom image filtered into existence, Maize and Zed both appearing in the picture like a hologram as Valerio's magic vibrated the room, the windows shaking slightly, letting me know how afraid he was for Maize and Zed.

"They are too weak to travel through the Spirit realm," I bit out. "I don't know where we are exactly, but I sensed mountain ranges while traveling, and it looks like a military post from the inside. We need a healer here as soon as possible."

It went without saying we needed to get them the hell out of here.

"What does it look like where you are?" Valerio demanded quietly as Maddox disappeared to get Cannon, no doubt. He traveled the fastest.

I tried to describe the cold building we were in and the apparent freezing conditions outside. After a moment, the connection severed because of how exhausted I was, and I prayed that Valerio and the rest of them would be able to find us.

I wouldn't lose Maize or Zed. I didn't care if I had to block them from ever entering the Spirit realm—it wouldn't fucking happen.

I couldn't tell you how long Cannon took to reach us, but I stayed there in that spot for every second of it, knowing that I couldn't leave either of them. Not like this. Not even to get a better look outside. Besides, Cannon was shifted and coming to meet us here as the others brought reinforcements. I had no doubt that once he caught their scents and my own that it would be simple for him to locate us. I fucking hoped it would be.

It was clear when he arrived, because his savage growl echoed outside, and the distant sound of him attacking someone caused a bloody gurgle to fill the space. Clearly, someone had been looking out. I was curious who it

was, but that wasn’t my immediate concern. No, my immediate concern was how fast we could get them out of here.

When Cannon trotted through the doors, immediately locking onto Maize and letting out a low rumble, I gently edged out from under her. He curled up behind her so I could rest her head against him, hoping his fur would keep her warm for the time being. At least this place protected from the wind I could hear battering the building.

I moved Zed to the side slightly and began looking at his injuries, as well as the marking on his neck. He was in bad shape, but it was clear Maize had not only saved him but partly healed both of them in the process. I looked over at my love, a blood drop marking on her collarbone barely visible through her dark hair that was drenched in blood. Blood that was both hers and Zed’s, if I had to assume. My eyes darted to where her hands were torn up, the flesh slowly healing but still looking gruesome.

Maize had saved both of them, but they hadn’t come out unscathed. That didn’t matter though, because they had survived. Now let’s just hope that she didn’t end up feeling guilty over Zed’s state, or else I would have to kiss her until she understood how goddamn perfect she was and that nothing about how she mated was wrong.

It was just unique.

What *was* wrong? Fucking Zagan.

“I’m going to go wait outside for them,” I murmured as Cannon tilted his head to the side in understanding. Sometimes I felt like his wolf purposefully pretended like he didn’t, but I knew Cannon was an extremely equal counterpart to his shifted side.

I stepped into the snow and looked around, shaking my head as I found I recognized where we were. In the Horde, there was a mountain range that separated the Dark Fae lands from us. There were a few valleys and openings, one of them being where the war against Mario was fought. The rest of it was snowy mountain ranges, and right now we were at the top of one. The early February winds were whipping across my face, and I could see blood staining the ground in the distance where it looked like someone had tried to run.

I made my way over towards the body, throat ripped out, and growled, noticing that it was an SE member, uniform and all. David had probably told the bastard to stay here instead of informing him of the potential danger. I didn’t feel fucking bad for his fate, and frankly, he deserved

worse. He had known exactly what was occurring and had chosen to do nothing.

I muttered a curse, recognizing this all had to do with Mario and his bullshit. The man may have been dead, but his influence continued to fester. Turning back towards the shed, I found that the building appeared to be, as I'd assumed, a small military post, one that was probably used for spying because it looked right out over the Horde.

Instead of making my way into the main building, I walked around the side and found another door that led to an office of some kind. It was clearly abandoned, containing scattered papers and some old lanterns. I searched the space for a second, finding a first aid kit, but unfortunately no blankets or anything like that. At least we had some medicine—that was something for sure.

I knew Maize and Zed's bodies would repair themselves, but I was a bit concerned about Zed's catching up after also experiencing Maize's powers. The new bond would drain him slightly, and until he got used to it, it would influence his healing.

As if reading my mind, I turned towards the door to find Zed had stumbled into space and sat down in one of the chairs, running his bloodied hands over his face.

"I was about to bring this to you and Maize." I offered him a bottle of water and some alcohol swabs. He began to rinse off the blood that coated his skin, and applied alcohol to half-open hook marks along his bicep.

When he spoke, his voice sounded exhausted but strong. I knew this type of thing wouldn't break Zed, but it may have changed him. His normal lighthearted tone was gone, and I found myself hoping the change wouldn't be permanent. Each of our team members brought something to the way we interacted, and while Zed could be irrational and sadistic, he was also essential to our family.

"She fed from my magic and blood. Outside of being tired, I think she's going to be alright…" He shook his head, clearly trying to reassure me despite understanding where he was going with this, and grunted. "This bond is fucking wild."

He was right. It was one of the reasons I had been more worried about him healing. I nodded, and after a minute he said something that sent legitimate chills down my spine.

“David is working with one of the Dark Fae guards who served with King Mario in torturing Maize; they are planning a coup against the throne.” Zed’s blunt nature always threw me, but today it was not only appreciated but also answered some of the questions that had been building up.

Mainly, *who the hell was to blame for this?*

“More so, I can tell something is different with his magic. I don’t know how he is being influenced or if he is tapping into some type of different power source, but it’s sick. It’s not normal.”

“What had Cirdan called it? Old fae magic?” I murmured and looked out into the snow and shook my head. “We need to tell Valerio and the crown. Who knows how deep the infiltration goes. We need to speak to Queen Gray and her guard directly.” Then I asked the final question I’d been holding back. “The man who tortured you, Zagan… Who was he?”

“Someone who hurt her badly, Chait,” he murmured and shook his head, looking furious. “He’s a sick motherfucker. Calls her a ‘pretty little bug’ and everything. I was scared I wouldn’t be able to stop him, and she gave up control just so he wouldn’t torture me—“

“She did *what*?!” I growled, my chair clattering to the ground as I abruptly jumped up.

He nodded. “It was so fucked up. All of this is so fucked up.”

Goddamn understatement.

Zagan was going to wish for the Spirit realm when I was done with him.

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CHAPTER 4

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MAIZE

“Little rose.” Philip’s voice sounded against my ear, making me smile.

My eyes felt heavy and I let out a sigh, not wanting to leave my peaceful cocoon. I swear the man had the unique ability to put me into a sleepy state with just a few words. Except that state was always mixed with being turned on, and right now was no different. My toes curled as I stretched against him, confused on when he’d come into my bedroom.

Had he been here all night? And when had I gotten back to my bedroom? Hadn’t I been somewhere else? My mind felt fuzzy and heavy as I tried to focus, yet no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remember. Why couldn’t I remember?

“Maize.” His lips brushed against my ear again, distracting me as I finally managed to focus on opening my eyes. His next words had reality coming back into perspective.

“I need you to wake up. We are almost there, but I need to know you’re alright. Please?”

Had I ever heard the man say please before? I wasn’t positive I had.

Grumbling slightly, I opened my eyes completely and found a pair of rich sapphire toned eyes meeting mine head on. I could see so many emotions swirling in his gaze, most of them dark and haunted, but the surface level was panic and fear. He was worried. Why was my mate worried? I frowned, smoothing my fingers over his golden, chiseled jawline as I tried to remember how to move my mouth.

Philip was so beautiful that every time I saw him, it caught me off guard a bit. The man’s normal roguish smile was gone, and that darkness,

normally hidden by a thin facade of amusement, was overtaking him completely. It was overwhelming yet addictive. I found myself wanting to dive into everything that was Philip as my fingers dug into the shirt he was wearing. It wasn't the normal luxurious material he donned, instead it was a simple black t-shirt that was wrinkled and a bit messy against his muscular 6'2" frame that was caging me against…

Well, I had no idea where we were.

"What's wrong?" I asked softly, his familiar rose scent settling something inside of me as my fingers traveled up the side of his face to play with his rose-colored hair that was silky against my fingers.

"What's wrong?" he repeated, his voice choked. "So fucking much, Maize…"

His gaze moved down my body, and I looked over myself, finding that I was covered in blood and rapidly developing bruises. That wasn't even including the iron brand marks along my ankles and wrists. Oh, or the holes in my hands. Zagan. *I'd forgotten about him.*

I wanted to panic about that, but I found I was too exhausted right now.

"Where are we?" I asked, trying to get my bearings, but considering Philip himself seemed a bit out of it, I wasn't positive he could help. Hell, even the space around us seemed different than normal, the edges black and wavering, everything else a void of dark space. Were we in the Dream realm or whatever? He looked so exhausted. Why was he using his power like this?

To find us. He was trying to find us.

His words managed to shake me from my haze moment by moment. "Dream realm, but I am barely managing to connect us here. I needed to know you were okay. We are nearly to the base of the mountain, but I could feel how weak you were. It was like you were dead instead of sleeping, scared the hell out of me."

I nodded in understanding because despite having fed, I did feel weak.

Zagan had done a number on my body.

"I need to feed," I stated quietly, my magic forcing the words out despite not agreeing with them. I shivered and shook my head. "No. I can't."

Especially not with the reminder of the predators like Zagan I'd been surrounded by for so long coming straight out of my nightmares and hurting Zed. I wouldn't let them taint moments with my mate. Yet a small

part of me wondered if it would make me feel better. Besides the physical element, the connection emotionally could heal…

Later. I would think about this later.

"Feed off Cannon or Chait," Philip demanded as I shook my head. "Maize, if it is going to give you your strength back and heal you, you better fucking feed."

"No," I murmured, my brow dipping.

When his lips seared to mine, it was hot and had me gripping his jaw tighter. All of a sudden, he yanked away from me and I felt his power break away, leaving me floating in an abyss. It made me wonder if I ever was going to come out of it…

A rumble underneath me had my eyes fluttering open and coming to consciousness. My fingers stretched out to curl into a dark, soft surface underneath me that smelled like snow and was warm to the touch.

Animal. I was lying on an animal…but instead of being scared, I felt comforted. I let out a sigh as a wet nose brushed my forehead. Unconsciousness pulled me under once again in that moment, removing my choice to see who exactly I was laying on.

"H*ello?"*

My voice echoed through the space as I looked around nervously, realizing that I was in a completely dark room. When I looked up, I noticed there was a white light focused on me, causing me to feel like I was under some type of clinical observation.

My breathing went fast as I heard shoes echo through the space, footsteps taking their owner closer to me.

"Maize."

My father's voice had my breathing going ragged as he stepped out from the darkness. Except…it wasn't him. It was another man.

"Pretty little bug." Zagan's voice came out the man's lips, making my breath catch and my knees nearly break. How did he do that? He was mimicking his voice perfectly.

When he spoke this time, it was neither of their voices, instead a smooth, accented voice that I couldn't place. "The Obsidian Butterfly. What a rare prize indeed. It's not surprising that your father used my magic to try to siphon yours. You have an endless supply. It's beautiful."

I couldn't talk as the man crouched before me, and I found myself looking into what I could only describe as an ancient gaze. The man himself was handsome, his dark hair pulled back against his tan skin, but his eyes were black and soulless, void of anything but amusement at my clear discomfort.

He was staring at me like I was an insect.

"It also doesn't surprise me that Zagan managed to take the one piece of your father's magic that was actually worth stealing. The ability to siphon magic, to restrain it, to drain it… me."

Oh fuck.

His fingers slid underneath my chin as his lips pressed up in amusement. "Do you know how long I'd been held captive, drained by my own magic and buried under the mountains, awaiting the end of eternity when cosmic beings decided to rid themselves of this realm? Thousands of years, Maize.

"But your father was so eager for the ability to drain magic, so he broke the captive cycle of my own magic. He let me in, and I drove him mad with the fear of the future. Of trying to take as much power as possible to save himself from our eventual end. Our eventual demise. He hurt everyone around him, and I absolutely loved it.

"But then I saw you." His voice was a purr as he pet my hair, my skin ice cold. "I didn't want him to hurt you, but he refused to listen, so I pushed him until he broke completely, and when he gave some of his power to his trusted guard, I decided to take a far more healthy vessel. Soon though, I will be able to let go of the boy as well. A means to an end… Do you know what I am really after?"

"What?" I rasped, shaking as he cupped my jaw and smiled.

"You." His magic wrapped around me like vines as he pressed his forehead to mine, causing a sickening sensation to grow in my gut. "I will let them destroy the Horde and all of the fae, and then I will take you back to the God realm."

What?

“Who are you?” I choked, my vision blurring. Suddenly, his form was even larger, his body clothed in green and gold with horns coming out of the top of his head. It was gone in a minute, but it didn’t change the echo of words that he spoke against my lips as he pressed a cold, hard kiss to me.

“Oberon.”

Oh hell.

“Maize!” Cannon’s growl had my eyes snapping open as I choked on air, clawing at his chest as I turned over and coughed hard. My entire body strained against the feeling of being drowned in magic. Specifically, fae magic. Everything swarmed me at once as all of the information the dream man had imparted came fresh to mind.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I began to breathe roughly, unable to focus on the space around me. Oberon. The fae god, Oberon… in my dreams. Shit.

My familiars seemed to be trying to move, but they felt constrained by the magic as well, causing me to breathe in and out so roughly I grew dizzy. I could practically feel their magic being drained and depleted while trying to ward off all the energy associated with that dream…

“Goddamn it.” Cannon’s hard voice ran through me as he flipped me towards him and seared a hot, demanding kiss to my lips. I closed my eyes, allowing him to take complete control as I let go.

I let go of everything, allowing him to devour my lips in a hard, possessive kiss that made me feel almost pliant in his arms. When he finally pulled back, I blinked up at him, finding white-hot eyes staring down at me as if flames were dancing in them.

“You’re naked,” I realized, feeling his hard cock underneath me as I straddled him. Holy shit. Suddenly, thoughts of fae gods began to seep away, completely focused on how large he was and the way his touch was turning my entire body into a melted puddle full of desire and lust.

I needed this man. I needed him inside of me.

“Who the hell was in your dream?” He cupped my jaw, ignoring my comment. I realized that his wolf was riding him hard, his voice a gruff

growl as if it wasn't him at all. My toes curled, finding that far too sexy as my breathing went ragged.

"Uh…" I frowned, trying to focus on his question as his nose ran against my neck and he let out a deep growl. My fingers came up into his hair as I fought the urge to not tug on it just to elicit a response.

"Was it another male?" he demanded softly. "It doesn't smell like any of us."

He could smell that? Damn. Well, now I knew for sure he could scent whenever I was turned on.

"I don't know how he got into my dream," I whispered and then jolted, finding myself caged and underneath Cannon completely, his massive frame shielding me. His earthy scent was causing everything inside of me to warm in familiarity, but his hard length was making me want to mark up his back as he rode me hard. I'd never had such primal, instinctual needs come to the surface like this before. It almost felt unstoppable.

Right now, his dark hair was covered in dry blood, and he had a wild look about him that felt so absolutely right for this moment. Right for fixing what was wrong with me. I knew my mate could fix everything that was wrong.

"I will kill him." His voice rumbled through me as my fingers ran over his chest and shoulders, finding that there was a lot of blood on him, and it wasn't blood that smelled like anyone I knew. I didn't like the idea of him covered in someone else's blood. My magic and I wanted him covered in *our* blood if he wanted that… *Oh holy hell*, I was off my rocker. My throat went dry and I licked my lips, the energy and vitality that surrounded him making me dizzy with need and hunger.

Before I could think twice, I rolled us and pressed my nose against his hot neck as his fingers gripped my ass, pulling me against his hard length. I whimpered, my tongue darting out to taste his skin as he let out a nearly feral sound.

"Cannon." My voice was nearly a whine that I didn't fully recognize. I was being driven by an instinct that I wasn't familiar with at all. I could have fought against it, but after everything I'd been through, the hunger raging through me, the overwhelming sense of relief to be out of Zagan's presence, and the dream I'd just had… I didn't want to. I wanted to give into this completely.

"I've got you." His voice was rough. "Trust me."

“Make me feel better,” I pleaded with him.

When he rolled us again, I fought the urge to battle for dominance, knowing that the man would understand exactly what I needed, probably better than myself.

I had to trust him.

“Do you trust me?” He echoed my own thoughts.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Then trust me when I say you need to feed, and I want it to be from me.”

I froze, my body tensing as he kissed me hard again and spoke against my lips. “*Do not* overthink this, Maize. You’re my mate. I’m your mate. You’re so weak you can barely see straight. I want you to mark me, and I want you to fucking feed.”

“You’re going to be trapped,” I whispered softly in a last effort of restraint, my mouth already watering at the idea of drinking from him and absorbing his magic.

“Not trapped.” He shook his head, his eyes shining with honesty and affection. “My soul has recognized from the start exactly how I feel about you, Maize.”

“And how do you feel?” It felt like time had stopped completely as I waited for his answer. It should have been too fast, but I knew how I felt about Cannon. How I felt about the man that had from day one tried to protect me. I knew the path I was traveling down, and I wished I could blame it on the mate bond, but it was so much bigger than that.

“I am falling in love with you. Not just as my mate, but as the brave, resilient survivor who knocked me on my ass the moment you opened that dorm door at the academy.” His voice was soft yet caused pleasurable shivers to break over every part of my skin.

Tears welled in my eyes, not for pain and not dampening my arousal, but somehow adding to it. “Fuck. I love you too Cannon. It should be to soon, but—”

His lips seared to mine. “Not too soon. Don’t overthink this.”

I nodded.

“Good girl.” He nipped my lips, causing my body to jolt as his animalistic energy filled the space. I shouldn’t have liked that he called me that, and I really shouldn’t have liked the next demand he issued. “Now feed. I want you to mark me.”

Before I could stop myself, my lips pressed against his neck and my small fangs buried themselves deep in his skin.

Almost as if waiting, our connection slammed into place, my skin lighting up with heat as I felt the familiar sensation of burning along my collarbone. Cannon hissed, making me want to see the skeletal imprint of my mark on his skin. What had he marked me with? Why was it so damn satisfying, marking one another? Like some primal urge.

But it was hard to focus on the marks, my entire body turning into a flame of need that only he could put out. I grew wet between my thighs, and every nerve ending lit up as I began to suck down his magic and life essence. Everything about him tasted good, his blood and magic tasting like a burning forest fire. I could have drained him dry, I realized, and when I finally forced myself back, Cannon didn't give me a second to overthink it. Overthink the urge to absorb every single element of the man.

Instead he slammed his lips against mine as my fingers ran over the marking on his neck, feeling ownership over him. I could feel his wolf running through my consciousness and our bond, my entire body flushed with a euphoric rush of power that was completely Cannon. Already I was feeling far better, but there was still a need. Need that was riding me hard as I tried to roll us over, but the man kept me pinned with his hips.

Cannon began to bite and lick along my neck as he tore off whatever remaining clothes I had on, causing my entire body to tighten as the cold air met my hot center. A small cry left my lips as his hot mouth closed over one of my nipples, swirling his tongue around it before tugging gently with his teeth. My body jolted with pleasure as I wrapped my legs around his hips, loving how his length was pressed right against my entrance, allowing him to slide right home if he wanted.

Its what I fucking wanted.

"Please?" I rocked against him as he met my lips again and pressed against my entrance, thrusting in as he worked his massive cock inside of me. I cried out at how he stretched me, still sore from Maddox, but loving how he filled me so deep. I couldn't focus on anything but the magic surrounding us, wrapping the two of us up in a cocoon-like bond. I shivered as he slammed all the way in, and my back arched, his growl of my name causing me to tighten around him.

"Maize." He rumbled my name, his breathing rough and uneven. "You feel how tight you are? I can barely fit my cock into your tight little cunt. I

have to practically force my way in. Be a good girl and relax for me, I want to bury myself completely inside of you before I mark every goddamn inch of my mate."

I tried to relax, but as he began to pump in and out of me, his movements primal, animalistic, and wild, I just squeezed him tighter and my legs locked around him, feeling my climax edge closer and closer. Cannon grabbed my wrists and pulled them above my head, moving slower and then faster, drawing out my climb up and turning me into a needy mess. A cry nearly bubbled up as I felt this primal instinct claw at me to have him come inside of me. To have him bury his teeth in me.

The idea sent me over the edge as I detonated and exploded around him. I whimpered as he possessed my mouth in a hard kiss.

"Maker, you come so fucking pretty," he snarled.

"Cannon," I breathed out, "I want you to bite me."

His eyes turned black almost instantly as he let out a savage snarl, pulling out as I let out a sound of complaint, only to be flipped over onto my stomach. I cried out in surprise as he yanked my ass back and slid into me completely, his much larger body over mine as he pulled my hair to the side, his nose against my throat.

"You want me to mark you, *mate*?" His voice caused my skin to break out into shivers as I realized very clearly that this was not *just* Cannon. No, his wolf was very present. Why the hell did I find that so hot?

"Yes!" I cried out after moaning his name. I whimpered as he nipped my ear and continued to take me at a hard and unforgiving pace. At the same time, it felt like he was worshipping my body fully. I could feel his affection for me through our bond, and it turned everything warm and saturated, like honey.

"*Fuck*. I am going to come inside of you Maize. I need to. I need to see what your little pussy looks like dripping with my come."

Yes please.

Before I could respond, his fingers grasped my breast roughly and pinched my hard nipple just enough that I went off like a rocket, climaxing hard. My arms broke as he slammed into me again and again, my head buried in my arms as I tried to keep myself from sliding forward. When he slid in the last time, he hit a white-hot point of pleasure and pain that had everything turning hazy right as his teeth sank into the back of my neck.

Oh.

Oh, *wow*.

Almost instantly, a fuzzy, warm sensation worked its way through me. My mind cleared of any anxiety or concern, I found myself melting into the ground, completely giving into my body's need to relax and bathe in the moment of being marked by my mate. I knew I needed to be more aware since we weren't in a safe location… but Cannon would keep me safe. He would always protect me.

All of them would.

Our mate bond was a bit different than the others, though, saturated with an animalistic energy filled with primal satisfaction. His tongue on the back of my neck as he licked away the blood caused me to let out a small shiver of relief at how fucking good it felt to be connected like that.

When he finally pulled out, I winced at how large he was, knowing without a doubt I would be sore. Cannon gently rolled me over and wrapped me up in his arms. His body heat warmed every part of my body, and I found myself curling against him as I tried to absorb every part of his energy and strength. I rubbed his chest and let out a sleepy, happy sound as the man pressed a kiss to my forehead.

After a moment, he chuckled softly. "Maize, open your eyes."

Had I closed them?

I blinked up at him and offered a goofy smile. "Hey handsome."

His smile grew as he dipped his nose to brush mine. "This mate bond is turning you into an adorable little kitten."

I made a little swiping motion with my nails as he barked out a laugh, letting out a soft, content sound. I felt like I was floating, but ever so slowly, I came back down as the realization of the entire moment hit me.

"That's the first time I fed on someone willingly without the risk of them dying."

"Good." Cannon's voice was unworried. "I wanted you to mark me before I claimed every inch of you."

My toes curled. "Which you did. *For sure*… You also said you love me." And I was blushing. Wow.

"I do. And you love me," he murmured and smiled. "It's fucking amazing."

"It is." I swallowed nervously. "Thank you. I needed this. I needed you. The man who held us captive…"

“Later?” Cannon inhaled sharply, looking suddenly very on edge. “Please, Maize, I am barely hanging on. The only reason my wolf let me shift back was to comfort you. If you start telling me about the soon-to-be-dead motherfucker, I will probably lose it.”

“So wolfy,” I mumbled with a small smile as he nipped my ear and made desire explode in my center. “I’m so glad you guys showed up… Where are the others?”

“On their way. Zed and Chait are outside talking… And of course we showed up! I was terrified you had run again.”

“I would never,” I whispered. I also felt immediate relief that Zed was okay enough to be walking around.

“I think I knew that… I just got scared.”

How could someone like Cannon ever be scared? I felt humbled that I was the one who could scare such an intense man.

I looked over his blood-covered chest. “Talking about being scared, what’s with the blood? I thought you were hurt before I realized it’s not your blood.”

“Some asshole that must have been on watch and didn’t realize the other assholes had left. SE, by the looks of it… I could scent you, and my wolf just went fucking nuts, assuming—rightly so—that he was part of the problem. He is pretty dead right now.”

My lips twerked up. “*Pretty* dead?”

“Oh yes.”

I nodded, knowing I needed to wait to explain Zagan and the dream to Cannon until everyone was here, so instead I just curled further into him as he let out a soft hum. My eyes closed as I realized his wolf was practically emitting a purring-like sound.

As my eyes grew heavy, I recognized that we needed to handle several things… Finding David and informing Gray of the coup against her throne. Seeking out anyone like him, not just for my sake, but for the sake of all those involved.

Then I would find Zagan…*because he would die for what he did to my mate.*

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CHAPTER ۵

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CHARM

"Do you think she would be upset if I locked her in the house?"

I wasn't really serious….*mostly*. Actually, that wasn't completely accurate, because if she agreed, I would one hundred percent never allow her to leave, but I also knew that wouldn't fly with Maize. Hell, if she even heard me suggest it she would probably kill me. It didn't stop me from entertaining the idea though.

The issue? I was entertaining the idea while sitting across from a man who looked like he was legitimately on the verge of officially snapping. Now that Valerio was holding Maize, any attempt at calm and rational thinking was out the window.

Where I felt better and relieved seeing her, he looked, if possible, even more worked up. Any pretense of him being collected was gone as he practically clung to her. I would have made fun of him if I wasn't completely jealous of how he was holding her.

Why couldn't I hold her?

A sudden jolt in our path pulled my attention to the carriage window where I could see uneven snowy terrain, which made our journey back to the Horde peaceful despite the small bumps. It helped that the entire space was filled with blankets to provide a warm cocoon for our butterfly.

Valerio's gaze met mine at my words, and while I had expected him to roll his eyes or fix me with a look, he just stared at me in confusion. Had I said something confusing? I didn't think I had. Then again, the man was a bit out of it right now. We all were. The immediate reassurance I felt at

laying eyes on Maize and seeing that she was alive was something I'd never experienced before, and it had me almost feeling hyper.

Not that she knew how much her presence and return to us affected our team, because currently she was passed out, wrapped up in a blanket and finally allowing her body to rest. I suppose one benefit of my position—despite being jealous that I wasn't feeling her frame pressed against mine—was that I could stare into her sleepy face and watch her soft breathing, ensuring my sanity with the fact that she was alive. Seeing her slow, even breathing soothed a part of my soul that had already been terrified that we'd lost our mate. That I'd lost my birdy.

"Lock her in the house?" Valerio clarified. "How would we do that?"

Nope. I should not have said anything.

"I was sort of just joking, we can't lock Maize up in the house." Although, as mentioned, it was tempting. I didn't want to encourage him though.

The look in Valerio's eyes wasn't humorous, though—it was thoughtful, as if I was onto something. *Shit.* Maize would literally kill me if he ended up pulling anything drastic. I tried to come up with something I could say to put him off of the topic, my foot tapping anxiously, but found myself coming up empty.

Would it be the worst thing to lock her up?

Fuck. Yes. Yes, of course it would be. Maize had been imprisoned for so long. I needed to absolutely get that concept out of my fucking head. What was wrong with me?

"Valerio," I stated seriously, "she's been locked up for years. We can not do the same to her."

"It's different," he protested. "*Contain not train*. Wasn't that what Edwin said? It wouldn't feel like she was being locked up, especially if she was home and with us, and we would only do it until we could handle this issue… I can't lose her, Charm. This is the second time she's been taken from us. I can't risk it again."

"She will actually kill you," I hedged.

Valerio nodded and met my gaze. "But she would be safe."

The man had lost it. *Officially.* I was going to have to protect Maize from her own goddamn mate and my teammate.

This was the problem with Valerio. In his mind, he could handle Maize being pissed at him if it meant her being safe. What he didn't realize is that

I didn’t think this would piss her off. No, I think this would cause a far larger and more permanent problem.

“Not necessarily,” I pointed out. “The magic has managed to supersede everything so far, including our own protective wards. It could end up putting her in danger if she is forced to go through them again and can’t. Plus, I have no idea how you would—”

“By putting the containment spell on her so she can’t leave the wards, no matter what magic she uses,” he whispered in realization, excitement crossing his gaze. I was already shaking my head, this entire thing getting far worse by the moment.

“Valerio, no,” I warned but he was already staring out the window in thought. I needed to tell the others about this. Valerio could be absolutely obsessive— especially about Maize, we were finding—so once he got focused on something… well, who the hell knew what could happen.

I didn’t continue to push it, finding that I was making it worse, and instead kept my gaze on my birdy. Maybe I needed to warn her. That would probably be a good idea, actually. If anyone could deal with Valerio’s bullshit, it was her.

I was momentarily distracted as Maize sighed and curled further into the blanket around her, making me smile at the small, soft gesture. *Maker. I was so ridiculous.* Honestly, sometimes it leveled me when I realized just how much Maize affected me. She had managed to occupy such a large space in my head in such a short amount of time, yet it didn’t feel like a short amount of time. It felt like she’d been there forever.

I needed to do better at protecting her. She’d been taken. *Again*.

While I understood and agreed with Chait’s belief that magic had influenced our heavily induced sleep, it didn’t help me figure out how the hell we stopped it from happening again. My plan to never sleep again wouldn’t fucking work if someone was putting goddamn spells on us.

We needed to do better. We needed to figure out how to protect her.

“Yes we do.” Valerio’s voice held a heavy amount of guilt. There was also that edge of determination that I worried would bring something drastic. I hadn’t meant to make him feel bad, and I knew he carried a large amount of the responsibility of this situation on his shoulders even though it was something he couldn’t control in the least.

“We just take it day by day,” I said quietly, wishing we were nearly home.

Luckily, it was no longer snowing, and the mid-afternoon sun was melting some of the heavy ice, making our journey a bit easier. Of course it had still been difficult to get the other four down the mountain because both Zed and Maize were bone tired, Maize's wings refusing to cooperate. Eventually, though, we reached the carriages at the bottom of the mountain, allowing us to head home.

Not before Maize and Zed had both been seen by the group of healers we'd brought with. They had been cleared and were officially considered not in 'critical condition,' but I knew Zed, and he looked like he was dead on his feet. It had been a goddamn battle to get him to rest in one of the other carriages we'd brought, but the minute he'd closed his eyes, he'd been out.

The bastard was not only healing but dealing with the sensory overload that was Maize's bond. While it was growing more powerful as more people joined it, the punch it packed when someone new joined was only growing stronger. That didn't even include the fact that she was faintly pulling on all her bonds right now in sleep. I didn't plan on telling her that, of course, because I would never want her to feel guilty about it, and I had a feeling she would feel exactly that.

"She smells like Cannon," I admitted with jealousy.

The connection between them was now similar to how she and Maddox were, and it was clear that while she had marked a few of us, their connection was on a deeper level. Maize had trusted the two of them enough to give herself fully over to them.

I wanted her to trust me that much, and not because of the sex, either… but I had absolutely no idea how to ask her for that trust. Ask her to give me a chance after how I had treated her before. I would be apologizing for that shit for the rest of my life, even if she did forgive me. It had been inexcusable.

I ran a hand through my hair, trying to not overthink this physicality shit. I knew Maize wouldn't care about my lack of experience, *if* we ever slept together in the first place, but I couldn't lie that it made me worry. Although why I was focusing on that of all things right now was beyond me.

Because I was always focused on how to become closer to my birdy.

"She fed off him… Which is good, she should have," Valerio admitted, although I could feel through our team bond the envy as well. I knew the

man was having issues not being in control of that type of situation, and more so that she hadn't marked him. I was honestly surprised he hadn't just demanded she do it.

My eyes ran to the red bite mark on the back of her neck, barely visible considering how she was turned, but making me want to bite her as well. Bite and mark each and every part of her body until there was nothing left of her that hadn't been claimed as mine. I shook my head at how ridiculous I was being. Although, she had another mark, a small outlined wolf, to represent him as well… so he did have two, and that made me more than a bit jealous.

Fuck. This was why it was so damn difficult being a demon. We were so insanely protective and possessive about shit, but instead of understanding dominance and strength, we just constantly bulldozed over everyone. I couldn't do that with Maize, though. Not just literally, but also because I respected her far too much to pull that shit. I viewed us as equals, and I wanted her to come to me because she wanted it and not because my demon was demanding our connection.

"I have no idea how to handle this," Valerio admitted softly, changing the topic.

"How to handle what?"

I knew he wasn't talking about the overload of information Zed had briefly thrown at us, something we were going to have to talk about in far more depth. No, I had a feeling that this was about this motherfucker, Zagan, who had tortured our girl for three years and was somehow still alive.

That wouldn't last long.

"I don't want to scare her, and after what she went through, I'm worried my magic will do that," he whispered, his jaw tight as he shook his head. "I know how to handle solving problems, but this shit? I have no idea what to do with it. Maize has had far too much fear in her life, and I am terrified I will symbolize that to her."

Valerio, terrified? That threw me for a loop completely.

"I don't think she will be scared of you. She's never been scared of you, and I think you need to give her more credit than that. She's one of the strongest individuals I know, and she's only grown stronger in the past few days. This isn't going to change that."

It was true. It was also true that I didn't think Valerio, of all people, would scare her. It was clear as day that the man was obsessed with her, and I was positive that she saw it. Valerio may end up locking her up, but he would never hurt her. Not intentionally.

"I know," he grunted and then shifted her so that she let out a small yawn, tucking her head against his neck. Maize mumbled something under her breath, but her entire body was slack, making me know that she was one hundred percent out of it.

My fingers came forward and brushed away some of her frozen, blood-soaked hair to find a handprint across her cheek. She curled into herself slightly, and my jaw clenched. I wasn't sure why the idea of this Zagan fucker slapping her upset me so much considering the woman had wounds healing on her hands from what appeared to be iron stakes… but it did. It felt more base. More cruel. More humiliating.

I'd been slapped around by my own mother growing up, so the action always felt immensely cold and dark. I could feel fury growing inside of me, my demon practically roaring in protest that there was some motherfucker out there that had hurt my birdy. Some bastard that was alive and not in pain. No one should have the ability to hurt Maize.

That was why we existed.

Valerio was suddenly transferring Maize onto my lap as he muttered something about getting 'air' and leaving the carriage. I didn't believe it. I mean, I did think he was worried, but Valerio wasn't one to step away to collect himself. No, I had a feeling he was on a mission to fix this entire problem as soon as possible.

It did leave me alone, though, with my birdy, and I would never complain about that. Her soft breathing against my neck and her relaxed pulse had me feeling a world better about the state she was in as I began humming a comforting song under my breath, trying to keep her wrapped up and as warm as possible.

When we got home, I wanted to take care of her. Make sure that she could heal fully. I also needed her to wake up so that I could make sure she was okay, but that was selfish of me—I knew she needed the rest.

"Charm?" Maize's voice startled me as I looked down into a pair of deep blue eyes brimming with emotion. Maybe she had heard my thoughts through the bond, or maybe it had been long enough that she'd woken on her own. My lips pressed up into a relieved smile, brushing her hair back as

she curled against me further, looking far healthier than she had when we first got into the carriage.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, birdy,” I whispered, emotion choking my words. My normal tendency was to hide my feelings, but I tried to let my walls down so she could see exactly how I was feeling, and the affection shining back in her gaze made me know it was the right move.

“I was scared, Charm. Really scared.” I knew it took a lot for her to admit that. “I thought Zed would die because of me.”

“Zed would have gladly sacrifice—”

“No,” she growled softly, shaking her head sharply. “No. I could not live knowing one of you died because of me. Because of Zagan.”

I nodded in understanding, knowing that nothing I said would change her mindset right now. Plus, I didn’t want to fight with her. After a moment, she spoke in a bit of a shy voice. “I used offense.”

I frowned slightly. “What?” For whatever reason, my brain wasn’t working well enough to connect what she was saying to me. But when she nuzzled against my hand and said it again, it clicked.

“You used offense when fighting him?” I whispered quietly.

“He had promised to not hurt Zed, so I said he could touch me, but when I came back from being unconscious, Zed was so hurt… I just lost it. I attacked before I could think twice. It felt amazing.” I cupped her jaw and watched as a dark shadow passed behind her gaze. “I wish I had killed him, Charm.”

I didn’t examine why her statement turned me on. Now was not the time to do that, and I honestly wasn’t positive I’d be happy with what I found.

“I’m proud of you,” I admitted, knowing how hard it was for her to use offense. I pressed my forehead to hers. “We will kill him, birdy. But do not ever do that again, giving yourself over to him just on the off chance he wouldn’t hurt one of us—”

“I will always protect my mates,” she whispered fiercely. “Zagan doesn’t get to do whatever the hell he wants anymore. I’m not a prisoner.”

Damn right you aren’t.

“What exactly did Zagan do?” I asked, not positive I could handle knowing.

“So much,” she mumbled and shook her head as if trying to clear her thoughts. My birdy spoke then, her eyes widening slightly. “There’s more though, Charm. When we get back, I have to tell you guys about the dream

I had. I'm worried Zagan's powers are so much worse than just Dark Fae magic. There is something big happening here, and I fear if we don't stop it, it could mean the end of fae."

Examining her expression, seeing the panic there, I nodded. "We will figure this out, I promise. You will never have to go through this again. I don't care what we have to do to make you feel safe, but we will. I don't want you living in fear of this bastard."

Curling back into me, she gripped me tightly and her eyes grew heavy, seemingly exhausted after our small conversation. I pressed my forehead down as I wondered, not for the first time, how I could have ever been hateful towards this woman.

Of course I knew exactly why I'd responded that way, I just found it ridiculous in retrospect. Maize had represented change and had affected my teammates, which had scared the hell out of me. *She had scared me*. I hadn't been able to read her, and this overwhelming attraction had been telling me that she was important.

If I had known she was my mate from the start, I would have acted differently. I would have realized that my frustration was misplaced… but at the same time, her knowing the raw truth of why I reacted badly made me feel as if we were closer. As if our bond had the potential to be so much deeper and larger than I ever imagined.

After the shit my mom pulled, I was determined to be the best mate possible, even if I was also an asshole. Never to her, but to others. I was nearly positive there was some type of middle ground for me… I mean, maybe I would do something for Valentine's day or some shit. It was celebrated here in the Horde despite it originating from Earth realm, so that could work. What did people do for the holiday, even?

I knew there were a few people I could ask, but all of the options had questionable advice at best… I had a feeling some would tell me 'the head of her enemy' was a good option, while others would jump right to sex. I needed to get advice on doing something softer, more romantic, and I knew absolutely nothing about that.

I muttered a curse under my breath, wondering how the hell I would pull off something like that. I mean, shit—I had literally no one as an example when it came to healthy romantic relationships. I was in this situation completely blind, so I just had to rely on my instincts, and frankly, they were a bit shitty sometimes.

I shook my head, thinking about the moment when I realized that my mother and father were so far out of love that it was more hate than anything else. No…not hate. That signified emotion. It had been indifference on my mother's end. It had also made me realize that I would rather be alone than ever have what they did.

"I have no idea what you want me to tell you." My mother's voice was edged in annoyance. "You know Brennon and I have always been attracted to one another."

I slipped from my bed and neared my door to hear what they were discussing in the next suite over. I was interested to know what exactly they were talking about… Although, considering the 'attraction' element and my uncle's name being part of it, I was pretty sure I had a good understanding.

"But my own brother?" My father spit out. "You know how I feel about this shit, and you don't even have enough respect to keep it—"

"Oh, stop it." My mother's voice was bored. "This isn't about respect, this is about you holding me back. I never wanted a mate; you were the one who told me it would work out. You were the one who told me that things would change when we had a family. A child."

"That's our son you're talking about." My father's voice was cold, but I could hear the sadness behind it, and I felt pain for him. I had come to realize my mother was a horrible person, and not only because she constantly fooled around with other men, but because she obviously wanted so little to do with us as a family.

"He's nearly a man, and any son of mine would understand that being locked into a monogamous relationship with someone like you is bullshit," my mother huffed.

My father's hand came down on a table, and I heard a door slam, making me swallow as I stepped back and walked towards the bed. Despite the fight, my mother continued to hum under her breath, completely unperturbed by my father's response to her hurtful words.

I never wanted to have a mate if they would end up like her.

Obviously, I'd known from the start that Maize was nothing like my mother. In fact, if anything, I had acted like my mother in an effort to keep people away from me. But it had failed, and I'd looked like a dick. I knew without a doubt that I would be working nonstop to right that wrong, even if it took the rest of our existence.

It would be worth it to gain her trust.

With a tired sigh, I opened my eyes and looked out, finding we'd arrived in a far more familiar setting. We were nearly home. My magic was wrapped around our mate, monitoring her subconscious as she let me read her desires, which ranged from a hot bath to the craving of safety. Of wanting to be loved. Accepted.

I smiled as a thought occurred to me… *That* was how I would prove my worth to her. I would be a vault, and unless she was okay with it, I would never reveal her desires to anyone again.

That way, no matter what happened, she would know she could rely on me to keep her confidence. I wanted Maize to love me. I wanted Maize to feel about me how I felt about her… But more than anything? I wanted Maize to trust me.

I would do anything for that.

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CHAPTER 6

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MAIZE

"Teacup." Maddox's voice was soft and coaxing against my ear, my eyes feeling heavy with sleep. I could feel that my body was surrounded by burning-hot water, and it was managing to dethaw my entire frame. The room I was in was thick with steam and smelled like a mix between lavender and Maddox's natural sea salt and caramel scent.

My mouth watered as I stretched, my core tightening with heat as I realized that I was resting back against Maddox's chest, his large cock hard and pressed against my ass.

Shit. How did I always forget how big he was?

Not just his cock, either. No, his entire frame was easily 6'5'', and he was built like the warrior he very much was. My body was both turned on and trying to warn me with massive red flags that after everything I'd gone through recently, I was not ready for that again… for him. I suppose, then, it wasn't a good idea to turn around and straddle him, especially after what Cannon had put me through. I shifted my body, feeling how sore I was. *Yeah*, we were not one hundred percent back in action at all.

The man's lips traced the shell of my ear as my head fell back, and I looked up into a pair of neon-green eyes that seemed particularly dark around the edges, nearly an emerald shade. If I wouldn't feel like such a weirdo, I could easily stare up into his gaze for fucking hours.

"Hey," I whispered, seeing a dark flare grow in his eyes as he smoothed a hand over my jaw and down my neck, examining my face. I had no doubt I looked rough right now, but he was looking at me like I was not only

beautiful but that he was ready to burn the world down for me. I found it entirely too attractive.

“You’re okay,” he stated. It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway, noticing how tight his jaw was clenched, the dark, stark tattoo covering half of his face from temple to jaw looking strained.

I had a feeling we’d been in the bath for a while now, the heavy steam causing his crimson hair to drip onto his massive chest and shoulders, and while I didn’t recognize this particular bathroom, I was almost positive we were back in the Horde and at our home. Was this Maddox’s bathroom? It was a bright white with green accents, the massive, sunken tub almost like a hot tub. *It was wonderful*.

Around me, Maddox’s magic rubbed against my skin. The almost static noise of it buzzed in my ears, causing me to feel almost an adrenaline rush from it. I wanted to feel it rush against my skin as he took me again… And damn, *down girl*. What the hell was going on with me right now?

“I’m thirsty,” I said suddenly, surprising myself with my request but realizing how dry my throat was. If Maddox was surprised, he didn’t say it. He easily flicked his hand, his magic transporting a glass bottle of ice-cold water into his hand from across the room. Almost immediately I chugged it down, everything in my body startling at the intrusion of hydrating liquid.

I think it was then that I realized just how injured I was. I mean, seriously—not only did everything hurt, but my stomach was empty, and my magic felt drained despite having fed. I could feel a burning on my collarbone from my new mate marks, and the back of my neck felt like it had been bitten into… Which, to be fair, *it* had been.

My connection with my familiars felt the oddest though. After we’d saved Zed, they had retreated inside of me, and while they did seem drained, there seemed to be something more. Almost as if they were in a forced state of sleep. My magic poked at them, but they simply ignored it, making me realize they probably needed more time than I was allowing them.

I would give them a few more hours, especially after everything we’d been through. Hell, I needed more than a few hours to recover.

I finished the bottle as Maddox nodded approvingly, grabbing it and placing it to the side for now, pulling me further against him as I sank under the water. I had so much I wanted to say, but instead I just took a moment to enjoy the peace. To enjoy how comfortable and safe I was.

“How long have we been back?” I asked quietly.

“About an hour,” he explained. “I was going to let you sleep, but I knew you were freezing and I wanted to get some of the blood off you.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, as his hands skimmed over my waist, causing shivers to ignite along my flushed skin. I needed to not focus on his touch, because I did not trust myself right now.

Looking around, I reached for a bottle of shampoo, but Maddox beat me to it and motioned for me to turn. I let my neck fall back as, not for the first time, I let one of my mates take care of me. It was a foreign feeling, allowing others to do so, but I couldn’t deny that I let out a small, content sigh as he began to use a small emerald cup to rinse my hair before applying a heavy amount of shampoo to it.

My eyes closed as he began to rinse my body off, his hands massaging over every sore muscle before rinsing my hair and repeating the process. His hands were so skilled and large against my frame that it made me feel like I could give into his control completely.

I let my eyes wander over his muscular frame to his neck, and more specifically, the scar there. As his fingers massaged conditioner into my hair, my frame curled up against his, I ran my fingers along the vicious injury. I knew most of my injuries from Zagan would heal, but I would probably have more scars from before, specifically on my hands. That was okay though.

As much as I hated my scars…or had…I was learning to view them differently. I didn’t mind Maddox’s, after all, and I knew for a fact that it hadn’t come from a pleasant situation.

If he thought it was odd that I was touching him, he didn’t comment on it. Which was probably good, because I was in a relaxed, nearly meditative state. I may have told him a few times how much I loved him, but I honestly couldn’t confirm because I was that out of it. In fact, the only thing that roused me from my stupor was a knock on the door.

“Yeah?” Maddox’s voice was rough and saturated with emotion, making me want to look up at him fully, but I couldn’t convince my body to shift against him. Instead I just let my eyes travel to where Charm stood in the door, a look on his face that almost appeared envious.

What was he envious about? *He could join us.* I was entirely too content to even feel embarrassed by that.

The demon had clearly showered recently, his wavy blonde hair hanging damp near his golden shoulders. He was wearing dark pants, but outside of that, nothing else, seemingly not affected by the cold air in the house. I could see gold rings littering his strong, large fingers, and the light bounced off the gauge he had in one ear, looking somehow both a perfect golden boy, almost angelic in nature, and something darker. I loved both equally.

His sweet scent wrapped around me as his magic tried to nuzzle me, and immediately I let him in, allowing him to see my desire for his touch, causing him to walk forward. Maddox made a small sound, but Charm ignored him, crouching down near the tub and pinning me with a look, his sunflower eyes almost amber with intensity. They shifted so beautifully under the light, and I was finding that Charm was far more expressive than I first realized. Or maybe I was just learning how to read him better.

“You need to eat, birdy, and Queen Gray is here to talk to you.”

Oh.

“Can’t it wait until tomorrow?” Maddox growled.

Charm shook his head, his face filled with frustration that made me think he agreed with the sentiment. “It won’t take long. I think she just wants to see her. To make sure she is okay herself.”

I let out a slow exhale and nodded. “Could you grab me a towel?”

Charm reached over to the counter and handed me one before asking, “Want me to grab you some clothes?”

“That would be amazing,” I offered shyly, and when his entire mood jumped with happiness, I realized something that had never occurred to me… Charm wanted to take care of me. I could feel it in our bond, and damn did it surprise me a bit. Not that I didn’t love it…but it still surprised me.

He left the towels and walked out, and Maddox shook his head as I offered him a questioning look. “I never thought I would see Charm acting like this.”

I turned into him and smiled. “It is a bit of a change, but I like it. Though I don’t like the idea of changing him.”

Maddox cupped my jaw gently. “You change all of us, Maize, for the good. Into better men. Now come on, I want you in warm clothes and eating something if Queen Gray insists on seeing you.”

I didn’t bother arguing with him as I got out, wrapping myself in a towel and using another to dry my hair. I braided it easily and then slipped

on the clothes Charm had left on Maddox's bed. I was completely dressed and cozy in minutes, the oversized sweatshirt and pants clearly Charm's and making me ridiculously happy. The primal, more base side of me loved the idea of being covered in my mate's scent.

Maddox was waiting for me in his room after I finished up in the bathroom, and I figured I needed to get a better grasp of how much time had passed. "How long did it take to get back? Where were we?"

"In the mountains, Dark Fae military post. Should have been abandoned but clearly wasn't." Maddox shook his head. "Took a few hours to get back, but the weather had calmed down a bit, so not too bad."

I nodded, looking out the large window in his room, recognizing the dark forest that surrounded us. It was evening. We'd been gone less than twenty-four hours, yet it felt so much longer than that. I tried to not focus on that, though, and instead smiled as I realized snow was falling around our home.

Our house was placed behind the Red Masques Academy, made of a gorgeous mix of masculine, dark wood and large glass walls. It was surprisingly modern, but I found that I loved it, especially since it allowed me to see nature without being exposed to the elements.

I'd never had a home before, but this was it. I could feel that in my bones. Honestly, moving in with my mates was possibly the best decision I'd ever made outside of coming back to the academy after running away.

Why had I ever assumed I could deny this bond? It was a stronger pull that I thought was possible to experience.

"How are you feeling?" Maddox asked softly. His fingers intertwined with mine, and I felt the last of my anxiety drain out, a calm, soothing energy inside of me insisting that we were safe. That it was okay to let down our guard.

"Better, just tired," I admitted. I briefly remembered seeing a healer in the carriage, but I knew they couldn't fix everything, especially a drainage of magic. I was just glad to know that I wasn't actively bleeding or injured anymore. My cheeks did flame slightly, knowing that feeding from Cannon was a large reason for that.

I froze as we walked out of the room, my eyes moving to Zed's closed door. "Is he okay?" It was a whispered question, and I found myself afraid of the answer.

"Yes." Maddox squeezed my hand. "Just sleeping. Want to go see him?"

Nodding slowly, I stepped forward as he leaned against the wall, content to wait and give us a moment. I eased the bedroom door open and slipped into the silent space. A relieved exhale left me as I found Zed's spread out form in bed, his muscular, tattooed body on display, looking cleaned up but rather drained. I could see the cuts on him, but Sy's spiderweb bandages had disappeared for now, his healing seeming to be occurring at a good pace.

I made my way closer to the bed and sat on the edge, running my fingers over the brand in the center of his chest, wondering how the hell that had happened in the first place. Zed was so beautiful, and his messy, damp, dark hair only complemented his stark skin and tattoos.

I wanted him to open his eyes, though, so I could see his lilac gaze and the way it heated on me with both sexual intent and something so much deeper and darker.

"Humans." Zed's raspy voice surprised me. I looked up, immediately smiling at the affection there.

Humans?

Oh, he was talking about the brand. Fucking humans.

Instead of holding back, I climbed onto the bed with him, and the massive bastard locked me into place on top of him, nuzzling my throat happily before mumbling my name. I relaxed into him as I tried to recall the question I had…

"Why a cross?" I asked curiously.

"They thought I was a demonic entity, a monster of old or something like that." He snickered and shook his head. "It would have been funnier if it hadn't hurt so damn much."

I pulled back, but he almost immediately rolled us so that he was looking down at me with soft affection. My words were pained as I brushed my fingers over his jaw. "I was so damn worried about you, Zed. I know you're okay, but fuck, I feel like this is all my faul—"

"It is not your fault," Zed growled, his fingers brushing over my throat. "Don't blame yourself because some psychopathic stalker can't leave you alone."

"Well, when you put it that way…" I mumbled.

Zed's eyes flared with heat as he stared down at my pulse for a minute before moving his gaze back up to mine. "Will you let me taste you, Maize?"

“Right now?” I swallowed, my eyes widening, wondering if he was talking about my blood or…

His smirk grew.

“I would love that as well”—he nipped my nose—“but we have guests downstairs, so I really did mean blood. If not, I understand, angel.”

“No, do it.” I pulled my hair to the side as his entire body tensed with excitement.

I honestly hadn’t expected him to surge forward, his pointed teeth slicing through my neck and causing my entire body to get hit with a heat flash that pushed a moan past my lips. I felt everything warm as my fingers ran through his hair, absolutely shocked at the sensations running through me but also at how our bond allowed me to experience how it made him feel. I arched my back up further, giving him more access as he continued to drink from me, even when my eyes grew heavy…

“Zed.” Maddox’s voice was sharp.

The blood mage immediately pulled back, his eyes nearly feral as he grasped my jaw and looked over me. I offered him a sleepy smile as Maddox chuckled in the background, seemingly on edge.

“That was hot,” I pointed out.

“Come on, we need to get you food.” Maddox pulled me from bed as Zed spread out again, looking far healthier but more turned on. “You better be glad you’re fucking injured, or else I would have kicked your ass for that.”

“Fucking liar.” Zed chuckled and winked at me, his spirits seemingly in a good place despite everything that had happened.

I blew him a kiss as I wiggled against Maddox, his fingers sliding down my waist as he put me down. I squeezed him in a tight hug as the dizziness started to go away, and I was left feeling absolutely exhilarated. How the hell did Zed drinking my blood give *me* more energy?

“You good?” he asked softly. “I would normally suggest going to see Cannon, but I don’t trust his reaction to you right now—”

“Is he okay?” I asked, snapping out of my haze. “What about you, the rest of you? Did…did the bond hurt you while we were apart?”

“Teacup”—Maddox kissed me hard before pulling away—“we are all fine. Zed is sleeping it off, and Cannon is as well. Charm, Philip, and Chait are all perfectly fine. The minute you fed, we began to feel better.”

“So me feeding was a good thing?”

“Yes.” He nodded sharply and smiled. “Although, you may have to deal with Valerio. I wouldn’t classify him as ‘okay’ right now.”

“What do you—*Valerio*!” I let out a legitimate squeak as I was suddenly ripped out of Maddox’s embrace and wrapped in a pair of muscular arms, the scent of midnight rain saturating the air around me as a deep growl came from his throat.

“He’s just lost it, teacup. Maybe you can rationalize with him,” Maddox grunted, my head peeking up from Valerio’s chest. Maddox walked down the stairs, leaving me with the naturalistic mage, who was holding me possessively.

I looked up into a pair of fathomless dark eyes that seemed to be memorizing my face.

“You okay?” I asked softly, my arms wrapping around him as he tilted his head to the side, looking predatorial and a bit animal-like, his amethyst-colored hair shifting to fall in front of his eyes.

“No.”

Oh.

“What’s wrong—”

“I need you to do something for me,” he whispered, his fingers tightening against me as I eyed him speculatively.

I trusted Valerio, but damn did the man scare me a bit sometimes. Not in the traditional sense, because I knew he would never hurt me, but…he was so damn overpowering and intense that it had the potential to bulldoze me. Also, to be fair, he was acting a bit off his rocker right now.

“What’s that?” I hedged. I had no idea what he was going to ask me, but it felt like something big, and considering the man could be somewhat of a bossy bastard, that could mean trouble. As in I would have to fight him on something, and I did not have the energy for that.

Maybe he knew that, though, and was trying to get me to agree now.

“I need you to promise me you won’t leave the house until we figure out what’s going on and how to stop it,” he murmured.

Oh man. That was going to be a problem.

I inhaled. “Valerio… First of all, I didn’t mean to leave the house or get kidnapped, clearly. Second of all, I am not going to promise I won’t leave the house. That’s unrealistic. I’ll try to not leave alone, but I won’t make you a promise I’ll probably break.”

Valerio's gaze darkened as if he was calculating something. I sighed, trying to explain the problem further. "I have spent so much of my life—"

"It's not like that," he leveled, his jaw tight, "I don't want you trapped, I want you safe. I don't want anyone to take you from us again."

I could see the fear there. Valerio, the man who inspired fear, was afraid, and it made me feel a string of guilt, trying to understand where he was coming from. "Like I said, I will try to not go anywhere by myself, but I won't promise to not leave the house."

"Will you wear a tracker necklace?"

Huh?

I blinked in confusion. "You want to track me?"

I didn't want to analyze why I liked the idea of that.

"Please?" he asked softly, his eyes sparking with something dangerous.

"Okay," I whispered after a moment, feeling like it was a good compromise. Well, 'good' was very subjective since the man was admitting he wanted to keep track of me like I was some… No, I wasn't going to overthink this one or make it into something negative. Valerio was doing this because he was a crazy bastard who was worried about my safety.

A victorious smile came on his lips, and I jumped as he rounded me and slid a piece of metal around my neck, my eyes moving down to find a simple yet sturdy necklace.

I heard him click the latch shut, and it seemed to spark something across my skin that felt pleasurable but also made me feel a bit *off*. Just different. I eyed Valerio as he walked around me and offered me an affectionate smile.

Okay…okay, it was possible Maddox was right. He was acting weird as hell.

"You guys good?" Philip appeared at the top of the stairs and almost immediately looked at the necklace, his eyes widening in surprise.

He narrowed his eyes at Valerio. "Does she know—"

"That it tracks her?" Valerio blinked. "Yes. Now leave it alone."

Philip shook his head, watching as Valerio stalked past, before approaching me and wrapping me up in his arms. His lips pressed to my forehead. "I need to apologize in advance…he has lost it a bit."

"So everyone keeps saying."

Philip pulled back, his eyes haunted. "Just know he means well… We just want you safe. Although, we seem to be at an impasse on how to do

that.” His fingers smoothed over my necklace. “I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just that he already put the necklace on you. Won’t be coming off anytime soon,” he muttered and shook his head before offering me a light kiss, causing me to feel a bit fuzzy in the head. “You ready to go talk to Queen Gray?”

The reminder had me nodding as I put in a pin in my need to question him more. For now though, we needed to go see our guests. Mostly because the sooner we handled it, the faster I could go back to bed.

“Zed already explained what Zagan said to you, but Charm mentioned you needing to talk to us about a dream?” Philip asked softly.

My breathing hitched. “Yeah…we may have a bigger problem than we realized.”

Before he could question my thoughts, we made our way down the stairs. I smiled, finding Gray already in our living room by the fireplace. Valerio sat across from her, Adyen, Athens, and Neo. Maddox sat in the kitchen with Chait and Charm, who both looked up at me before all of them eyed the necklace I was wearing. *Yeah,* something was up for sure.

Although, I had to admit…in the moment I was a bit more focused on our guests and the smell of whatever amazing food Chait was cooking up.

“Valerio, you said you would wait on the fucking necklace,” Maddox barked out, causing Gray’s eyes to snap over to me before smiling.

Valerio waved him off and continued to talk to Gray’s mates as I made my way closer. I could interrogate them about the necklace later. Right now I was just happy to see one of the only women I considered a friend.

Immediately she was up and hugging me. Unlike normal, she wasn’t wearing a crown or anything like that. In fact, she was just in jeans and a sweater, and it made me feel like far less of a slob.

Honestly though, Gray could look gorgeous in a paper bag. She just had that element to her that I couldn’t exactly pinpoint.

“I am so glad you’re okay.” She offered me a relieved smile. “I was worried about you…although maybe I should still be. You’re letting your mates track you? To dictate where you can go? Are you okay with that?”

I winced slightly, understanding how that probably sounded crazy.

“It’s a compromise. If it makes them feel better…” I shrugged.

“That’s fair,” Gray hedged and then narrowed her eyes at Valerio, though she still spoke to me. “Just let me know if you are never not okay with it.”

Oh man. Valerio was totally annoyed right now, but I just waved it off and sat down next to the insane bastard. I appreciated her concern, but I knew what I was doing with Valerio… I think.

“Baby,” Athens’ voice was amused, “Neo and I have decided it would make us feel better to track you as well.”

Gray rolled her eyes. “Right, because you don’t already do that.”

“But they have a cool necklace to do it.” Athens offered a smile.

“Adyen would just steal the necklace,” Neo pointed out, seemingly amused with his twin. Honestly, until I’d met them, they had both scared the hell out of me. They were massive, especially compared to Gray, but around her they turned into total goofballs.

Well, Athens did. Neo was still terrifying.

Adyen looked over from his conversation with Valerio and shrugged, which caused Gray to make an amused sound before shaking her head. “Probably. He already steals all my hair bands.”

I eyed the wrist she pointed at as I realized it was true. “That’s sort of cute.”

She winked at me and then leaned forward, keeping her gaze more focused and serious. “Now, do you want to talk about everything that happened, or would it be easier to write it down? I understand if you don’t __”

“No, it’s fine,” I promised. “Zed already filled you in on the Zagan part, but there is more.”

That brought the room to silence.

When Chait came to sit next to me, I instantly was looking over his extensive piercings and tattoos, the way he was dressed in all black only enhancing his ‘bad boy’ look. The man may have been slightly shorter than the others, but he held himself like he wasn’t, his golden jaw tight with tension as he wrapped our fingers together, their stark, tattooed nature causing me to be momentarily distracted.

The man’s scent was a mixture of magic and something uniquely him, and while I didn’t fully understand his connection to the Spirit realm, I knew that it caused the fuchsia streaks in his hair to pulsate and change

color based on how much magic he used. I swear I could stare at the man all day long and never get bored of it.

"*More*, as in more details about Zagan, or—"

I decided to dive right into it. "When I passed out after marking Zed, I had a dream. I was completely alone in this void of empty space with a single light hanging above me…"

"Creepy," Gray noted.

I nodded, offering her a knowing look. "When a voice called out to me, it was my father's, followed by Zagan's…so of course, I assumed it was a nightmare. It wouldn't exactly be unusual for me."

Philip made a noise in the back of his throat. I knew that he hated hearing that, so I reached back and squeezed his hand, wanting him to know that my dreams weren't his responsibility. Even if he didn't agree with me. Although, even I had to admit I'd been having far less of them now that he was around. I wasn't positive if he was blocking them on purpose or not, but it was for sure helping.

"When the individual speaking to me came into view, I realized it was neither of them, though. The man who appeared in my dream is someone I've never met."

"It's a guy?" Charm asked, his voice tense.

"Yeah, so of course I started to freak out a bit," I admitted. Valerio shifted next to me, and when I met his gaze, it was completely blank of emotion. That, I *knew*, was far from a good thing.

"He didn't tell me who he was at first, and instead started spouting off some tales about how my father had first woken him up from his eternal imprisonment, or something along those lines. He claimed that he'd been the one to give Mario the ability to siphon and drain magic by lending him his own. Something that actually makes a lot of sense, because until right after my father imprisoned me, he never had that ability."

"So this dream entity—or man—is the one who convinced your father to do all this horrible shit?" Gray hissed.

"I don't know," I hedged. "I think he did to some extent, but I got the impression he was using my father to rebuild himself and grow more powerful. It did allow him some control over Mario, and when the bastard finally got himself in deep shit with you guys and was killed, this…entity… transferred his consciousness to Zagan, who had been part of many of my father's experiments. Apparently, my father had lent him some of his magic,

so it was an easy way for him to continue on his pathway to rebuilding his power."

"Why would he do all this? Just to break out of his imprisonment?" Gray demanded.

"I mean, it's as good of a reason as any," Athens admitted, his gaze clinical.

"*That*, and he wanted to reach his goal…"

"Which is?" Gray asked, her eyes flashing with concern.

"Me," I admitted heavily. "He said he wants the Horde to fall—presumably by David's hand, if he's working through Zagan—and take me."

I tried to not focus on how all of my men froze at my words, or the dangerous sound that came out of Chait's throat. I jumped slightly, not expecting it, as he met my gaze, looking furious with a streak of fear. His hand gripped mine tighter, as if he was worried about me being ripped away from him.

"And you didn't recognize him?"

"No," I whispered, "but he told me his name."

"He did?" Gray demanded.

"Oberon. His name is Oberon."

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CHAPTER 7

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MAIZE

"Oberon?" Gray's eyes went wide and dark. "Like the fucking fae god? Titania and he have nothing to do with this realm anymore; they haven't for centuries. Why would he care about what happened to the Horde?"

"I think he's imprisoned here," I admitted and then frowned. "I don't know where, though. I don't get any magic signature from him when I'm not in that dream state. In fact, even when he was with Zagan, it was faint. Not something I would have noticed if it hadn't been for all the time I spent around the asshole's magic—"

"Not around," Maddox grit out. "You weren't *around* his magic, you were being subjected to it."

I offered him a small look as he inhaled and tried to shake himself.

"There is someone who may know where he is," Gray murmured, seemingly distracted, and then looked at her mates. "Do you think he would be willing to talk to them? I know Palo is aware of a lot of mythos and history, but directly having the source is a bit more helpful."

Someone who knew more than Palo? Impressive, and something he would no doubt take offensively. I hadn't spent a lot of time around the man, but it was beyond clear to me that he was extremely proud of how much he knew.

Neo's jaw clenched. "I mean, if he talked to Silas, he would probably talk to them."

Adyen sighed. "How that just managed to slip his mind until recently is beyond me, for the record."

"Who?" I asked curiously, feeling a bit anxious.

“Raziel.”

I looked at my men, who all seemed frozen with tension, Valerio’s head starting to shake before I even had a chance to ask who the hell this guy was. “Raziel? Who is that?”

“Someone who knows Oberon well,” Gray insisted.

“That’s a dangerous idea.” Valerio hesitated, sounding unsure. “You’re positive he would know?”

“Absolutely. He would at least help you clue into where he possibly is hiding,” she said quietly. “I can come with you, but I was planning to talk to Paolo. That way we can create a plan. Are you okay going by yourself?”

“Where is he living now?” Philip asked, jolting me because I could practically see how unsure they were about this idea, which meant the man in question was either extremely dangerous or off his rocker.

“Nightmare forest,” Adyen answered gruffly. “Right on the edge of it, far from the castle. You probably can make it there tonight if you go now. I wouldn’t put it off for too long… He probably is already aware you’re coming, truth be told.”

Valerio shook his head. “Not tonight.”

“Why not?” I asked, confused, his eyes darting down to my necklace.

“You’re injured,” he explained, looking tense as Maddox chuckled.

“Why are you acting so weird?” I arched my brow.

“How about…” Charm drew out, “Valerio and Maddox, you two go to Raziel’s? We can stay here.”

Gray offered me an amused look. “I think Maize should go.”

I did also.

“I want her resting, Your Majesty,” Valerio nearly gritted out, making me squeeze his hand because the guy was sounding a bit insane.

“Alright.” I sighed and looked back at Gray. “Is there anything else I can help with? I am going to try to remember stuff, especially from while we were with Zagan, but he wasn’t exactly focused on information…almost exactly the opposite.”

Gray seemed to be a million miles away for a second, before nodding and focusing back on me. “If you remember anything else, let me know. For now, I am going to talk to Palo and see what he knows while they meet with Raziel. Maize, I have to apologize. I had no idea that SE was dealing with such major influences; my guards are working with the Red Masques to further help identify the problem. I fear this is far larger than just a problem

for the crown—I think this may affect all of fae. I don't know what else to say except that I promise you I will take care of this, and we will figure out what Oberon has to do with it."

"Let me know what I can do," I insisted quietly, not wanting her to feel blame for this but also comforted by her ability to be so decisive. Gray was a true leader, and I was unashamed to admit that I looked up to her.

"I would like us to get home before it gets too dark." Adyen stood, but something occurred to me, making me say 'wait' before they got up to leave.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

"I need your help," I admitted. "Recently we took Richard Flank's daughters into the Academy. I have reason to believe that they have undergone significant trauma at the hands of SE guards that her father allowed into their home. I know they are safe at the Red Masques Academy, but I would like to petition for them to have their own house here or somewhere in the kingdom. I don't want them feeling like they are trapped or don't have options."

Gray's eyes darkened as something dangerous flashed in her gaze. "Trauma?"

"She was sexually and physically abused by numerous SE guards growing up, and I think her sisters may have been to some extent also." Maddox's voice was rough and uncomfortable. "Her thoughts are fairly locked down, but when she sensed Zagan's magic while she and Cirdan were here, I got a pretty good sense of how bad it was…and that was just with him."

I needed to go visit Brielle. I had no idea how she handled reminders of her abuse, but if she needed support, I wanted to be there for her.

Gray's jaw clenched. "Normally I would offer for them to stay in the castle, but I fear they wouldn't be any more comfortable, especially because of all the SE forces there. Let me talk to my sister and see if we can arrange for something. Do you know if this is something she wants?"

"I'll talk to her and make sure, but I want the option to be there," I stated quietly. I knew Cirdan would be pissed, but I wanted her to have the freedom to find herself. As much as I loved my mates, that year by myself at the castle had allowed me to realize I could be independent and had options, not just captivity.

Not just abuse.

Not just pain.

“Okay, I’ll have Vegas stop by at some point. Or Edwin.” Gray nodded in understanding. Immediate relief flooded me as I considered the conversation I would have with Brielle and how I would go about explaining my thoughts on why it was a good idea. I was so distracted that when I said goodbye to all of them, even giving Gray a hug, I found myself wanting to go talk to Brielle now. Although, if Valerio didn’t want me going to Raziel’s home, he probably didn’t want me going there.

Honestly, I would have fought it more if I wasn’t so tired.

“She really doesn’t need to apologize,” I pointed out as they left. It wasn’t her fault that the SE’s culture was ingrained with that shit. If anything, it was her brother's fault because he’d been the previous king. When I turned to look at my boys to see if they agreed with me, they all seemed to be having a weird silent conversation.

“What?” I asked softly.

“Oberon,” Valerio growled, approaching me and breaking the weird moment between all of them.

“Yeah,” I mumbled and drew a hand across my face.

“You need sleep,” Philip insisted, drawing attention away from the subject. “I promise I will keep an eye on your dreams. I hate the idea of a fucker infiltrating them.”

The possessiveness there was comforting, I couldn’t lie. I nodded and then looked outside where snow was starting to fall more heavily.

“Could someone contact Brielle for me? Tell her my idea or ask her if we could stop by? Maybe on your way back from Raziel’s place or whatever?”

“About that,” Maddox stated quietly, “I think you are going to find yourself facing a lot of resistance from Cirdan and his team.”

“I don’t care,” I whispered, meeting his gaze. “Those girls need to realize they have options and freedom. I love living with you guys, but I had over a year to realize I was no longer in captivity while they are just leaving a toxic home situation. They need to know they are safe. Whatever they decide is up to them, but they deserve options.”

Charm grunted. “I actually agree.”

“I do as well,” Valerio muttered. “Fuck, they are going to lose it though.”

“Then they lose it.” I shrugged. “I dare Cirdan to pull shit.”

Chait's smile turned wicked. "I would pay to see the witch try to do that as well."

I had a feeling Chait and I could get in way too much trouble if we were ever bored. Luckily, we seemed to be facing problem after problem, so the likelihood of that was almost nonexistent.

Valerio looked thoughtful. "How about we bring Brielle here in the morning?"

"Okay." I nodded in agreement and looked at both Maddox and him. "Are you guys going to be okay to go to this Raziel's house?"

"Yes." Maddox looked amused. "We've been around him before; it won't be an issue. Although I wasn't aware he was back again. I thought he'd been traveling the past few years."

Chait nodded in agreement, seeming confused.

"Who is this guy?"

"Someone who has been around far too long," Philip mumbled. "Someone we didn't even know still existed until a few years back."

Damn. I was now imagining some ancient man with long white hair and robes… Somehow I had a feeling that wasn't the case since everyone seemed uncomfortable about him.

Valerio stepped up to me and kissed me hard. "Get some sleep, we will talk more in the morning."

About how crazy he was being?

Maddox smirked at that and stepped closer to me. "Before we leave, can we do something quickly? I need you to close your eyes and remember your dream the best you can. I am going to try to pick up any details."

I didn't question him, letting my head fall back as he immediately invaded my consciousness. With him there, I felt not nearly as uncomfortable running through what had occurred. When I was done, Maddox slipped from my mind as if he'd never been there. I opened my sleepy eyes to find his jaw tight, but I was so tired that my eyes closed again, right as his lips brushed my forehead.

I knew I had hit my wall of exhaustion when everything turned dark around me. That was okay though—I trusted these men to help me figure out how to fix this problem we had found ourselves in. I trusted them with everything.

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CHAPTER 8

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VALERIO

"Teacup is going to kill you." Maddox, the bastard, looked elated at the prospect of my future suffering. I muttered a curse under my breath and kept my gaze ahead, refusing to give this topic the attention it would no doubt receive tomorrow. I just needed to know she would be safe tonight. We could handle everything else later.

"Let's just get this shit done," I grunted as Maddox continued to whistle in a cheery fucking tone that made me want to hurt him. Instead, I focused on the area around us, noticing how quiet it was because of the fresh snow that was falling. We were the only tracks along the outside edge of the Nightmare Forest, which meant that no one had been in or out of this way for a bit. Well, by foot. I knew that Raziel portalled almost everywhere, because the few times I'd seen him, that was how he'd appeared.

"You know it's possible he's going to kill us or some shit, right?" Maddox mused.

"Yeah," I grunted, "which is solid reasoning for not having Maize come with—"

"And because she can't."

I shook my head knowing that this was never going to end, but immediately felt myself grow more serious, noticing a solid wall of black stone appearing down the path. I knew Raziel's place was a goddamn fortress, and the completely black stone estate looked more like a goddamn castle with its high walls topped with iron and imposing three-story height that seemed to just blend in with the forest behind it. If you weren't looking it would be all too easy to miss it.

I was completely unsurprised when the gate opened for us and we found no one there. The path leading towards the house was made of moonstone that lit up with each step, and the door to the massive mansion opened to reveal a brightly lit foyer. As we made it up the stairs, I was caught off guard by how homey the entire place looked. I offered Maddox a confused look as I noticed small touches throughout the imposing foyer that didn't seem to fit. Like a vase of orange and pink flowers or a comfortable throw pillow that said 'welcome.'

Raziel was terrifying. I said that objectively, because the bastard had been alive for several millennia and spent most of it slaughtering his way through the realms with his brothers. So to say I was a bit caught off guard by how welcoming the place was an understatement. Although it started to make sense when I heard a door open downstairs.

"You never let me talk to anyone!" A voice insisted, sounding amused underneath the obvious objection. "Just let me meet them."

I could barely hear the response of the individual, but I knew it was Raziel based on his magic, which saturated the area. I wondered who would win this debate, but when a woman practically darted out of the hallway, shooting a smile behind her and sprinting down the stairs, Maddox offered me a surprised look. I'd heard a lot of rumors about Raziel, but this was not one of them. Then again, the man kept mostly to himself.

"Hello!" the woman greeted happily, making it to the last step before… she was gone. I heard a distant argument and the closing of a door and wolves barking. I looked at my brother as he shrugged and took a seat on the couch near the front door. Was that blanket hand-knit? I frowned and grabbed it, noticing that on it there was a large 'R' and 'K' next to one another.

Cute?

The sound of heavy footsteps coming down the steps had both of us looking up as I found a rather pissed looking Raziel muttering under his breath, the distant sounds of the woman trying to open the door clear to even me.

"What?" he demanded, crossing his arms, making it clear that he did not want to be having this conversation. "You have two seconds to ask me your question. That door is going to give out if she keeps pulling on it, and I do not want either of you around her."

Maddox chuckled as I exhaled sharply. “Okay. Fine. Queen Gray said that you would be able to help us with the location of Oberon. He’s been contacting our mate, and we can’t beat him if we don’t know where the hell he is.”

Raziel froze, staring at both of us, as his eyes darkened. “Oberon has been contacting someone?”

“Yes, saying that he’s been gaining power to break out of imprisonment,” Maddox explained. In the distance I heard doors open, and the same woman came down the steps, looking happy. Well, until she saw Raziel and how surprised he seemed by the news.

“What did you two do?” she demanded harshly.

“Nothing.” Maddox put his hands up. I had to admit, she seemed a bit vicious when she was angry. Raziel simply tucked her against him as he seemed to continue to think through something.

“There is no way he should be able to break out,” he leveled quietly. “Unless he’s pulling from a massive power drain.”

“He was for some time—he pulled from the entire Dark Fae kingdom. He gave King Mario the ability to siphon magic in return for feeding him energy.”

Raziel’s jaw tightened as he looked down at who I had to assume was his mate or partner, her eyes dark and concerned about his expression.

“Roan?” Raziel’s tone was sharp, and another man appeared seemingly out of thin air, the woman jumping as she shot him a scowl. One he ignored as he looked at Raziel with a questioning expression.

“Have Haro use the looking glass to check on Oberon,” he insisted. “Apparently he’s been causing problems.”

“You know where he is?” I demanded.

Raziel shook his head. “Not exactly, but we are keyed into his magic.”

“Okay,” Roan hedged, “but Haro hasn’t come out of his suite since the entire thing with, well… you know.”

“She has a name.” The woman rolled her eyes. “And for the record, this is completely his fault.”

Raziel smirked and then leveled Roan with a look. “Just have him do it.”

Raziel turned back to us. “I will see what is happening with Oberon, but I suggest keeping your mate as secure as possible. If he’s after her, it’s for a

reason. We have been trying to locate him for some time; he is able to shift and move his prison."

"That sounds useless," the woman pointed out.

"Yes, yes it is," he muttered in thought before looking down at her. I had no idea why he looked suddenly upset, but if I had to guess, having a mate of my own, it had to do with her wearing a robe. Although, to be frank, I hadn't noticed until he brought it to our attention.

"Get out," Raziel snapped as his magic forcefully removed us from his house, the doors slamming shut and leaving us on his front porch.

"Are we like that with Maize?" Maddox asked immediately.

"Yeah," I admitted and then shook my head. "Speaking of which, let's get the fuck back to her. Hopefully Raziel will find something, but either way we need to get Oberon back under control. I am not losing Maize to some immortal fae asshole."

"Hey, maybe if you explain everything, she won't think you're fucking crazy for what you decided to do," Maddox mused.

I grunted. I hoped he was right but I had a feeling he wasn't.

Maize

I honestly couldn't tell you how long I'd been sleeping before the quiet sound of a flute and fluttering of wings pulled me from a deep, comfortable sleep. One that I had been wrapped up in completely, surrounded by Philip and Chait's muscular frames. When I finally managed to open my eyes and sit up, I found myself in my moonlit bedroom on my massive bed.

I narrowed my eyes at the sky outside and realized that it had to be almost three in the morning, maybe later. *Damn.* I hadn't meant to sleep so long. Had the guys gotten back? If so, where were they? I brushed my hair from my face, the damp texture having come unbraided while sleeping and now cool to the touch.

How had I fallen asleep so fast? Had I fallen asleep downstairs? Honestly, it didn't even surprise me considering everything I'd been through and how comforting this house was. It created a feeling of warmth and safety in my chest.

I may have been kidnapped outside of these walls, but I still felt safe here. Safe with my men. I didn't care if I had to fight a fae god himself to keep that sense of security and safety. I had gone too long without it to give it up now. *To give them up.*

I rubbed my eyes as the noise sounded again. I looked around, noticing that the windows were closed, so neither sound should have been possible. My mates stayed asleep as I slipped from bed and followed the noise towards the massive mirror on the wall, the twinkling of bells now added to the symphony. I should have been scared considering everything that had happened, but instead I just felt curious.

That was a dangerous thing, no doubt.

The mirror's mercury-like texture showed off my exhausted and pale face. It still had yet to heal completely, but it looked considerably better. Honestly, I felt far better after some sleep and being wrapped up in my mates. Although I was a bit concerned I was starting to lose it considering the noises I continued to hear as if they were coming from my own head.

"Maize."

Oh, no I was hearing my name. That wasn't good.

When the surface of the mirror began to warp, I stepped back immediately, moonlight making the mirror glow unnaturally. I jolted as Philip's arm wrapped around my stomach and Chait quietly stepped in front of me.

When the hell had they woken up? I couldn't ask that, though, because suddenly the room was filled with black butterflies that flew from the mirror, landing on my skin and turning pink and blue. My eyes widened as my own magic began to spark and turn the entire space into a bright explosion of colors. It was enough to distract me that I was confused when black fog began to leave the mirror in an eerie effect.

"What the hell is going on?"

I couldn't answer Philip's demand because suddenly a figure, about my size, stepped forward out of the mirror and offered me a small smile. *It was the woman from the forest.* Except this time there was no shaded aspect to her physical appearance. She was wearing a silver dress that fell off her

shoulders, and her dark hair was hanging down to her waist, showcasing a face that was eerily similar to my own.

That made me so uncomfortable, I couldn't even tell you.

Maybe it was some weird illusion...

"Maize." She offered a small smile before scowling. "You're injured! What the hell happened? I was only gone for two days at most!"

I sighed. "Long story… Wait, I thought you were a figment of my imagination or something! Who the hell are you?"

"That is a long story as well." She offered a small smile. "But you will know soon. You can call me Cethlenn, though. When we meet in person, I will explain everything, but for now I need you to do something for me."

"Okay?" I offered hesitantly, noticing how tense my men were. Frankly, I didn't blame them. People kept asking me to do shit, and it made me worried that one of these times it was going to be something insane.

"Come to the Demonic realm," she insisted. "I know it's a lot to ask since I only recently found you, but it is essential, Maize. I will open up a portal in the Horde's pixie circle in exactly twelve hours. I need you there. I need you to help me."

Oh hell.

"Why the Demonic realm?"

"It is the only place we can meet in person," Cethlenn explained.

I considered what she was saying and whether I trusted her or not. I had no reason to, yet my gut was telling me that while she was odd, this woman was someone vital and important. I looked at the large window in thought before meeting her gaze again.

"Fine." I frowned. "I can't leave for long though."

"I promise you, it will barely be an hour of your time," Cethlenn insisted with a small smile. She stepped back and tilted her head as if listening to something. "I must go. But be there, please. Also, you are going to want to take off that necklace or else you won't be able to meet me."

The woman was gone then, and I was left more confused than before. Considering everything going on, that was saying something.

"Holy shit," Chait mumbled.

I turned to face them, the room silent and no longer filled with magic. "No shit. What the hell is even going on anymore? This isn't a dream, right? And what did she mean about the necklace?"

I wouldn’t have even focused on the comment if my mates hadn’t been acting so damn weird about it all night.

Philip grunted as Chait’s amusement grew. “Oh, you mean the necklace that Valerio put on you? The one he said was a tracker?”

“Yeah…” I felt cautious about the amusement in his gaze.

His smile grew. “Yeah, you’re going to want to ask him about that one.”

“Just tell me,” I growled.

Chait kissed my cheek before admitting, “It doesn’t just track you. It keeps you from leaving the house completely.”

Oh fuck no.

“Valerio!” My face was flaming with color as anger surged through me.

Chait and Philip called out to me as I went to the bastard’s bedroom, finding it empty. I tried to not be distracted by how cozy it looked or how the bed looked extremely welcoming. Considering how tired I was, I couldn’t think about sleep, especially if I was going to kick his goddamn ass.

“He’s out back!” Maddox called from his doorway, looking thrilled. I briefly noticed that he didn’t look like he’d slept yet, and I had to wonder when they’d gotten back exactly… There were a lot of questions I had, but right now I had one priority.

I used my heightened speed to get downstairs in a second flat and stormed towards the back door. Immediately I spotted his dark clothes and hair against the pale snowy background, his hands braced on the balcony rail and eyes on the forest. Watchful.

Was he seriously on watch right now? The man really had lost it.

I faltered in my steps slightly, softening a bit at how protective he was being and how upset he must be…only to remember how pissed I was.

I had tried to compromise! He had been allowed to track me, but instead the bastard locked me up in my own home? I threw open the back door, but when I tried to step out, I winced as I hit right into a solid ward wall, my nose stinging on impact.

I let out a frustrated sound as Valerio turned towards me, his face dawning in realization. He opened his mouth to say something but then decided not to, his calculating gaze running across my expression.

“Baby…” he hedged.

“You had no right,” I snarled. “I said you could track me, not keep me locked up in my own fucking home.”

He walked up to the ward wall and frowned. “It’s for your own safety.”

“Bullshit,” I hissed. “That is exactly what my father said when he used to lock me up in my bedroom. You are acting insane, Valerio.”

Valerio’s eyes darkened at the mention of my father, and I instantly felt guilty. It was a low blow, but I couldn’t lie, that was the immediate feeling that rushed forward in the panic of being trapped in my damn home.

“Maize, I am not arguing with you about this. I am not losing you again. You accepted the necklace, and until we figure out how to solve this, you aren’t leaving the goddamn house.”

Holy shit. He was serious.

Fine. If he wanted to play it that way, then we would. My anger cooled into something darker as my eyes narrowed on his, knowing a yelling match wasn’t going to resolve this.

“Who created the necklace?” I demanded, already putting together why the magic was different and had felt foreign against my skin.

“Cirdan,” Valerio admitted.

I stepped back and then grabbed the door. “Okay, Valerio. Play it that way.”

I slammed the door shut, locking it, as he offered me a frustrated look. I could see that he was going to bust through the lock, which is why I offered him a sweet smile and let my magic expand and coat the house protectively.

If he wanted to keep me locked *in*… then I would keep him locked *out*.

“Maize.” His growl showcased his temperament as I stepped back, flipping him off and walking towards the kitchen. Fuck him. Fuck him and all his bullshit. I could deal with a lot, and usually level-headed, but someone taking away my damn freedom? No. I was not doing this anymore.

I had been so understanding!

“Yikes,” Maddox mused, walking down the steps and looking at Valerio, who was pounding against the wards.

I pinned him with a look. “You knew!”

“Once you put the necklace on, there is no getting it off unless he agrees to, which I knew he wouldn’t.” He sighed. “I figured I would tell you after some sleep… You know, so you could kill him well rested.”

My lips pressed up slightly, trying to not find that amusing. It was rather thoughtful when you truly considered what he was saying.

“What the hell is going on?” Zed grumbled, squinting and covering his eyes.

I smiled, relieved again to see him. His dark hair was messy, and because of it, he looked younger than his twenty-six years. He was dressed in an oversized shirt and sweatpants, covering some of his tattoos. When his lilac eyes met mine, they lit up with affection and I launched myself at him, forgetting about Valerio pounding on the door outside. No doubt the man was just getting more pissed and agitated by the moment.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked as he picked me up under my ass and carried me over to the kitchen counter so that Maddox and he were standing in front of me, purposefully ignoring Valerio as well.

“After drinking your blood? I had the best night of sleep ever.” He offered me a cheeky smile. “We should do that more often.”

“How about after she fucking heals,” Maddox muttered.

“Whatever you say, *teacup*,” Zed poked back as Maddox narrowed his eyes and started pulling out food for breakfast. Oh, I could do food for sure.

The house shook as Valerio’s magic tried to force its way into the wards. I finally looked over at him and offered a small wave. I couldn’t lie, there was a small part of me that was extremely excited about how worked up he appeared.

“Oh man, he looks pissed,” Cannon mentioned, walking down the stairs and pressing a kiss to my forehead. I was so happy to see him that I locked my legs around him, nuzzling against his chest. His wolf immediately reached out to connect to my magic, and a rumble broke from his throat. His grip on me turned possessive as he inhaled my scent and made me sigh happily, feeling so content pressed up against him like this.

“More pissed than ever before actually,” Chait noted, appearing next to me out of nowhere. “What did you do?”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” I shot back. “Valerio decided to put a collar on me to keep me caged in the house like a damn pet.”

Chait knew that, though, and he nodded seriously as I rolled my eyes. They were all part of this as far as I was concerned.

“You did say he could track you,” Charm murmured as he came downstairs.

“Yeah, but he didn’t tell her all of it,” Philip pointed out. “Besides, Charm, wasn’t it your idea to lock her up— Ow, fuck, damnit.”

I narrowed my eyes at Charm, who had punched Philip in the arm and was now offering me a cute smile. “He’s lying, birdy. It had been a joke, and the man clearly didn’t understand that because he’s mental.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that, and I found myself not nearly as mad as before, mostly because I knew Valerio would take off the necklace…or else I was going to probably actually kill him.

I sighed. “I have a feeling you’re right. He’s also about to break through my—”

My back hit a bed upstairs as Valerio shattered my magic and somehow was caging me in a second flat. My eyebrows rose as I smiled up at his intense, dangerous expression.

“You dug your own grave on this one,” I explained softly and with calm patience. “Now get this necklace off me.”

“No,” he growled softly as my eyes narrowed.

“This isn’t up for debate.” I kept my voice firm.

His eyes flared with frustration. “What exactly is up for debate, Maize? My own mate’s safety? I keep trying to do everything I can think of to keep you safe, and none of it works! And then the one time I do find something, you’re angry with me. I can’t handle losing you—”

“You won’t.”

“That’s not true!” he growled. “You allowed yourself to be tortured for Zed, baby. This bastard Zagan knows exactly what you are willing to do and not do. If he takes you away again, I am not just afraid of not being able to find you, I’m terrified that it will mean losing you forever.”

I could see the authentic fear permeating every inch of his expression.

“Valerio…” I tilted my head and sighed. “I understand you’re scared, but locking me up is not the way to handle this. I said you could track me, but I will not be caged. If you can’t accept that, then we have much bigger problems. Mainly that you don’t respect me enough to take my needs seriously and tell me the truth.”

All the tension drained out of Valerio, and his brow crumpled. “Of course I respect you, Maize.”

“You aren’t willing to take my feelings into consideration, which makes me feel like you don’t,” I whispered, running my fingers along his face to soften my words.

Putting his head down, he seemed to think through something before meeting my gaze again, his eyes almost shining in a deep purple and silver mixture. “Baby, the idea of you being taken makes me furious… I’ve never had anyone as mine before, and I feel like I am failing at keeping you safe because you keep getting taken away from me.”

My smile grew soft as I cupped his jaw. “I get it, really. But this isn’t the way to go about it. Plus, what if it ends up hurting me when someone does try to pull on my magic? I don’t know how you have managed to ward me and the house, but I could end up really screwed.”

Fear flashed in his gaze as he groaned. “Fuck, you’re right. Charm brought that up to me also.”

“I want to solve this also, Valerio, so let’s do it together,” I whispered, “but please don’t cage me like my father did.”

Valerio was so put out that I nearly smiled but instead added, “I’m fine with you tracking me still, if it makes you feel better. But just that.”

After a moment, he grunted and turned my head, his fingers on my necklace. I relaxed, trying to keep my magic under wraps. It was a bit worked up, wanting to exert dominance over our mate, which spelled complete trouble, frankly. When he whispered a phrase in Latin, I felt the necklace break open, and I smiled…before my magic flooded out.

I hissed as it lashed out and slammed into Valerio, his groan echoing through the space as he rolled over on his back.

Crap.

I crawled over him and realized that I’d fucking poisoned him. Goddamnit.

“Shit, how does this keep happening?!” I demanded.

He laughed in a strained manner. “No, I fucking deserve this shit, baby __”

My teeth sliced into his neck, and I didn’t hesitate to pull the poison from his body, drawing it out completely as his fingers grew tight and demanding on my skin. Our bond slammed together, and I jolted as I realized all at once that the connection of all my mate bonds occurring at once had everything in my body turning into a heated tidal wave.

Oh, holy power wave. I could feel power moving under my skin, and instead of the slight undertone of the connection, I could feel every element of the eight of us moving in a cohesive wave of power. My brain felt fuzzy with euphoric relief. I'd felt a lot of power before, but shit this was something completely new.

"Holy hell," he groaned, "you are so powerful, Maize."

I let out a small moan as he rolled us so I was underneath him completely, his gaze traveling over my skin with heat as blood dripped from his neck. His purple eyes ran over my collarbone as he let out a growl and leaned down to nip the spot that was burning, causing my entire body to tremble slightly.

"Fuck. I love seeing my mark on you." My eyes moved down to where he was focused, my breath catching at the sight of an outlined skull resting on my skin. It wasn't super detailed, but it was very clear what it was, and it fit my bond with Valerio perfectly.

"I love having your mark on me," I sighed, feeling relieved that our connection was humming under my skin, making me feel completely lit up.

"Baby." His voice was rough. "I don't say this very often, but I'm sorry. Maker. I'm so fucking sorry, Maize. I shouldn't have done that shit without asking. I don't…I don't know what's wrong with me. I can't think right around you, and I just want to make sure you're safe."

"I know," I whispered and then smiled. "It's why I'm okay with you still tracking me…just not with the weird witch necklace that won't let me leave the house."

"Letting me track you is dangerous," he murmured as he rubbed his nose against my collarbone. "I'm fucking obsessive when it comes to you."

"I like it," I admitted and nibbled my lip. "I'm okay with the tracking. It…it makes me feel like you guys will find me easier if something like that happens again."

"It never will," he promised before picking up my hand and kissing my wrist. I let out a small hum as his lips grazed my scars. I didn't want to tell him he couldn't promise that, because I truly believed he was going to do whatever he could to ensure I didn't get hurt or taken again.

"Let's find this bastard," I stated softly, and he offered me a wicked smile.

"So…" I drew out and tilted my head. "Another reason that I am glad you took that necklace off me… We have to go down to the Demonic realm

today to meet the lady from the forest and dream in person."

"What?" He frowned in surprise.

"Yeah… She appeared in my room last night through the mirror."

Valerio inhaled and then closed his eyes, hopping up. "Okay. *Alright*. Let's handle this one thing at a time. First we need goddamn coffee." The last part was a grumble, but I still appreciated how calm he was trying to be about all of this.

I smiled at him, taking his hand, nearly telling him that his love for coffee was one reason that I loved him…but I was a bit of a baby when it came to shit like that. As we walked downstairs, I promised myself that I would figure out a way to tell the insane bastard how I felt.

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CHAPTER 9

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VALERIO

I fucked up this morning.

Right now, I could only be thankful that Maize hadn't found another way to kick me out of our home. *The worst part?* She wasn't completely wrong in doing so. I'd been so caught up in her being taken from me, I'd lost track of the woman I was protecting and how she would feel about my actions. I just felt thankful that she'd forgiven me and found it more amusing now than anything.

I shouldn't have been surprised about it, but that was Maize—constantly surprising me. She sat next to me at the kitchen counter, looking a far cry better than she had when we'd carried her out of the Dark Fae military post. In fact, she seemed more focused on Raziel and explaining what had happened with the woman in the mirror than any of my bullshit.

I was perfectly content with her forgetting it and forgiving me…but it wouldn't stop me from getting a new tracker crafted for her. This time it really would be just a tracker, though, and I planned on having it handmade by a metal mage so that it fit who Maize was perfectly. I knew she would understand it was a functional piece of equipment, but I wanted her to view it as a gift instead. Just one of the ways I wanted to spoil her.

Honestly though, considering the lack of sleep I'd gotten and now getting used to this mate bond, I really was trying to fight the urge to just carry her upstairs. It was rare for me to not be motivated for the day, but right now I was exhausted and wanted to hold her.

After she had gotten ready, she found her way right back to me, freshly dressed in the Red Masques uniform we'd given her. *To wear to the Pixie Circle.*

I felt like we were constantly being exposed to new information, and I could feel it accumulating, weighing us down with the serious nature of this entire situation. I found myself fearing what it would lead to. I didn't doubt we could handle it, but I didn't want Maize going through anything else. *She deserved better*.

I wasn't as perceptive of her desires as Charm, but I could feel what she feared now to a small extent, and one of those fears was that everything in her life that was good would take a turn for the worse. I didn't know what I had to do to stop that thought from haunting her, but I could prevent it. I would do whatever I could to make sure our girl still had a smile on her face when all of this was over.

Zagan would die.

The SE guards responsible for these horrible actions would be punished.

Even Oberon would suffer.

But Maize would leave all of this smiling.

"Twelve hours from then is this evening," she pointed out to the rest of us. "I was hoping to meet with Brielle beforehand. Have we managed to get in contact with her?"

Maddox nodded, and Chait handed her a fresh cup of coffee, making her cast him a smile I was instantly jealous of.

"She should be here soon, actually," Chait said. "I had her bring her sisters as well. Hopefully she listened to me about not informing Cirdan and his teammates… I would rather not deal with them today."

"I also was woken by a written notice," Cannon added. "Commander Edwin and his wife will meet us at one of the houses further back on the Academy grounds, sometime this morning. The place is separated a bit from the rest of the academy but still within its protection. They are preparing it now just in case the girls decide they want it."

"Damn, that's nice of them, she said. Her next question had me smiling.

"Why do all of you seem so frustrated with Cirdan and the rest of them? Are they really that much to handle?"

Yes. Yes, they fucking were.

"Just a bad reputation," Maddox murmured.

"I have never seen Cirdan lose it, personally, and I have seen him do a lot of terrible shit. He's not exactly stable," Cannon agreed. "Not as bad as some in the Red Masques though…I suppose you could just consider it a different type of crazy."

“Some?” she clarified as I shook my head, knowing who he was referring to.

“Yeah, namely Everett.”

Maize frowned and tilted her head. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“You met with Nova and her men; he was the death mage,” Chait pointed out.

“She was around them?” I demanded softly, immediately concerned about her safety. Maize leaned back against me in an effort to comfort me. I swear, this woman said she was bad with emotions, but she was so damn naturally in tune, I don’t think she even realized it.

“This past fall. They were asking about Mario and his power drain,” Maddox confirmed and then sighed. “I have heard they’ve been seeing it a lot during their travels in the realms.”

“Maybe we should tell her about the Oberon thing,” Maize suggested.

My head snapped up then, as there was a knock on the door.

I didn’t disagree with her, in theory, but I felt like that was an idea better left for Queen Gray or her sister to handle. I wasn’t saying we didn’t have our problems, but there was crazy, and then there was Everett and his team. I could say that with surety because my cousins, Fox and Cassian, were part of it, and I had never met two individuals so fucking out of touch with reality.

Well, that wasn’t true—the entire team was like that. The most rational was maybe River, but I’d heard since meeting Nova he’d been different, so that was concerning to an extent. As in, I was worried about the Red Masques’ reputation because of what they could get themselves into.

I was just glad that I wasn’t in charge of them anymore since they were no longer in the Academy. Sure, Cannon sometimes worked with them, but I wasn’t responsible if they committed mass murder or something. That was Edwin’s problem.

Which worked, because they were on about the same level as Commander Edwin’s family, and I just didn’t mess with that type of crazy. It was far too unpredictable, and that was coming from someone who had just put a spelled necklace on his mate so she couldn’t leave the house.

When I opened the door, Brielle immediately met my gaze. I frowned, noticing the two smaller girls behind her, both gripping her jacket tightly. They offered me scared looks, and I let out an exhale, relaxing my energy.

Even Brielle visibly relaxed. *Crap.* I was horrible at not scaring people.

I stepped to the side so they could see Maize, and all three entered without another word to me, clearly happy to be free from my space.

Normally it wasn't something I would mind, but it made me worry that Maize would think I was doing it purposefully. When I met her gaze, though, I noticed that she was offering me a soft, understanding look that had me feeling worlds better.

"I'm so glad you could come." Maize's voice was soft as she led the girls to the couch, my teammates spreading throughout the first floor of the house, attempting to give them space. I was well aware we were intimidating, so I made sure to sit in a large armchair away from them a bit, keeping my gaze on the window and the brightening Academy grounds so they could ignore my presence.

The only person who wasn't stepping away was Cannon, and that was because of his wolf. Now that they were awake and healed, he was not going to let Maize out of his sight.

"I'm glad to see you're okay," Brielle murmured. "I didn't realize Zagan was someone you knew."

Both of the younger girls seemed to shrink at the name, and Maize offered Brielle a small look of understanding that now was not the time to talk about it, before looking at the youngest. Much like their sister, they had red hair, but the smallest, dressed in an oversized jacket, had dark eyes, where the others had green.

"And who is this? I don't think I ever got your name."

"Adeena." The youngest offered a small smile. "You're Maize, right? Brielle said you're the one that made it so we could live at the Academy and maybe train."

"Well, I can't take the credit for that completely, but I am happy you're here." She smiled at the girl as her eyes lit up happily. Maize looked at the other girl. "And what's your name?"

"Eirlys," she stated, far more serious than even Brielle, her gaze dark and sad. A haunted shadow that I knew came from a childhood filled with experiences that no adult, much less child, should go through.

"Right." Maize nodded. "Well, I wanted to offer all three of you something, and you can absolutely tell me no, but I am hoping it would make you feel more at home here. Give you a sense of freedom so you don't feel like you are—"

“Trapped or stuck?” Brielle finished. Maize nodded.

“I talked to Queen Gray last night about this, so if you agree, it’s already been approved. Her sister, Vegas, is married to Commander Edwin, who is in charge of the Red Masques,” Maize explained to the younger girls as Brielle nodded, clearly already aware. I could tell she was happy Maize was including her sisters in the conversation though.

“They have a house similar to ours, on Academy grounds, that they are offering to the three of you.” My mate smiled. “Your own home. No dorms. Just a fresh start.”

“Really?” Adeena grabbed Brielle’s arm. “Can we? The Academy is so dark and gloomy, look how pretty this place is.”

The kid wasn’t wrong.

“Does it come with any stipulations?” Eirlys questioned.

“No,” I voiced, as Brielle seemed to be having a silent conversation with Maize. Both women shared a smile, and the young woman nodded in understanding.

“Let’s go see it?” Brielle questioned.

“Can Cirdan and Kye come with?” Adeena asked, hope gleaming in her eyes. It was clear the younger girls had begun to trust the witches, and while I wasn’t against that, I could see how it would be hard for Brielle to handle considering how unstable their life was right now.

“Let’s leave them be for now.” Brielle’s voice was filled with tension. “Come on girls, we need to be able to be on our own sometime.”

Maize nodded as if she agreed, but I nearly scowled at that. My girl never needed to be alone again—and probably wouldn’t be. If I’d been following her around before, now I was practically attached to her, and I didn’t feel bad about it in the least.

As we left the house, I noted that the early afternoon skies were gloomier than normal. Was it going to storm? I could distantly hear the creatures of the forest shifting around, and my own raven flapped its wings eagerly under my skin, urging me to shift. It happened so rarely that I couldn’t imagine doing it.

I probably needed to, though. I needed to stay in tune with that part of myself and not just the part that inspired fear.

Cannon came with us, but the others stayed at the house, saying that they weren’t needed since we weren’t going far. I knew, though, that the real reason was to keep the younger girls from feeling uncomfortable or

overwhelmed with all of us around. Instead, they were keeping tabs on the forest around us as we made our way down a thick path, passing house after house.

It also didn't escape my notice that now that we were all bonded, Maize's ability to be more physically distant from us had grown just slightly. Not a ton, but enough that she didn't seem to feel uncomfortable as we left the house. I could feel the team bond we had far stronger, and it allowed me to feel a sense of security for everyone's safety, which was something that I'd constantly felt on edge about recently.

While we didn't know exactly where this house was, Cannon was easily following Edwin's scent, and when we approached a storybook-like clearing, I let out a muttered curse. It was most definitely not just Edwin and his wife, Vegas, if I was to believe the magic signatures saturating the air.

As we broke into the clearing, I immediately categorized the dark, quaint cabin that stood out amongst the snowy setting. Smoke curled out of the chimney, and the windows showcased a modern yet modest and tasteful inside. It was the perfect amount of space for the three of them, and I found myself hoping that when Cirdan found out, he wouldn't destroy it or some shit. It was clear these kids needed some bit of hope and peace.

"Is this it?!" Adeena nearly squealed, running forward and making me chuckle. Eirlys swore and chased after, leaving Brielle and Maize smiling at them. When my girl looked back at me, she offered me a soft smile, and I realized that she was finding my reaction amusing.

I wasn't around kids very often, but I loved teaching, and the older I got, the easier it was to imagine having my own family. Namely with Maize.

"Valerio." Edwin's voice filled the clearing. I offered him a head nod, and Brielle ran ahead to where her sisters had already busted into the place.

Maize came to stand next to me as Edwin approached, followed by his wife. I could see the rest of their team—nine other men in total—relaxing in the clearing as three wolves sat curled up to create a comfortable, almost bed-like surface. I briefly noticed they had brought their daughter with them, and I had to admit, it was objectively funny seeing the tot sitting on top of the wolves, looking around the space with interest.

"Maize!" Vegas smiled happily. "It is so good to see you."

“You as well.” Maize offered her a hug back. I don’t think my girl even realized it, but not only had she started trusting herself far more, but others were trusting her. I could see a bit of tension in Edwin’s frame at them touching, but when Vegas pulled back, completely unharmed, it seemed to vanish.

“You brought a big group with you,” I pointed out.

Edwin nodded. “We had a shit ton of work to do on the place, so hopefully it is good enough for now.”

“It’s so cozy.” Vegas motioned for Maize to follow. “Come look.”

As they walked towards it, I spoke quietly, needing to warn Edwin ahead of time. “It is entirely possible Cirdan is going to show up here and… well, I’m not sure what he is going to do.”

“Why?” Edwin demanded, immediately looking at Vegas. I didn’t blame him—I didn’t want Maize around any explosive witches either.

“His team has taken an…interest in Brielle.” I drew a hand down my face. “He’s a bit possessive over her.”

“A bit?” Edwin offered me a smile, seemingly amused with my statement. He wouldn’t be for long. “What is a *bit*?”

Suddenly I felt a familiar spark in the air as I shook my head. “I have a feeling you’re about to find out.”

A second later, Cirdan appeared out of nowhere. I was surprised he was alone. Not that you could fucking tell, as the wind whipped up around him and he stormed across the clearing, causing Edwin to immediately shield the house with dark shadows that created a complete barrier.

I offered him a look of gratitude, knowing that I was probably the only one who had a chance of talking Cirdan down. We weren’t friends, but I knew him more than anyone else here. When I stepped in his way, he immediately let out a sound that had my magic rearing up in defense.

“I don’t want a problem,” I bit out. “*This* is not something you can control.”

I also really didn’t want to fight with the bastard.

Cirdan stepped into my space, his voice low and threatening. “Not something I can control? Valerio, I have been one moment away from kidnapping Brielle from this place all goddamn week, so do not tell me what I do and do not control. She is mine. I don’t even want you fuckers around her.”

“This is not about us.” I motioned to the house. “Maize and Vegas are both in there with Brielle and her sisters. Maize wanted to give the girls the option to have their own living space, a place to start fresh. They accepted. This is what they want.”

Cirdan froze as his eyes moved over to the cabin. “I don’t want her out of the Academy dorms. If they want to move, they can move in with us.”

“No.”

“No?” he growled.

“No, Cirdan. You know as well as I do that what these girls have been through isn’t normal. They need to feel safe, and I am not saying you would hurt them, but you’re fucking volatile, man. They need some stability. A home does that. I am sure Brielle will want you over—hell, the little one literally asked if you could come over—but you need to let them have this. Let them have a choice in where their life goes next.”

Cirdan’s jaw clenched as he looked at the house before looking back at me. I sincerely wondered if he was about to say ‘fuck it’ and if I was going to actually have to fight him.

Luckily for all of us, he closed his eyes. “Fine. Fucking fine. But I expect you to tell me when you find Zagan. You want me to keep my cool, then I want a chance to extract every drop of blood from his body.”

“Deal.”

Cirdan’s magic calmed and he muttered a curse, walking towards the cabin, seeming in a far better headspace. Edwin retracted the shadows, eyeing the witch with far more amusement than seemed necessary, but that didn’t surprise me in the least.

What I felt for Maize was insane, and I had been acting irrational since meeting her…but the difference between me and Edwin was that I recognized that. I knew it wasn’t normal. Edwin not only embraced insanity, but his entire team and Vegas seemed to feed off it. I’m positive they found Cirdan’s outburst amusing, because that type of shit was a common occurrence with them. As in a *daily* occurrence.

Before Cirdan could reach the cabin, Brielle stepped out and immediately pulled him to the side to talk. Which was good, because I didn’t feel comfortable with him in a contained space with Maize, and I knew Vegas’s husbands felt similar. I could practically hear Cannon pacing while on watch, combing the forest perimeter, feeling anxious about his proximity to our girl.

A few minutes later, Maize walked out with Vegas, the girls and Cirdan going back into the cabin. I smiled at Maize, who seemed both overwhelmed and entertained with the hundred-mile-per-hour pace Vegas seemed to be talking to her at.

After they said goodbye, I nodded towards Edwin and the others before we parted ways. Cannon was waiting for us near the tree line.

“Why did you stay back here?” Maize asked curiously.

Cannon sighed. “I didn’t want to risk detracting from the reason we’re here by causing a problem. Kodiak doesn’t like me around Vegas.”

Maize frowned. “Why?”

“His wolf.” He shrugged. “Dominance and mating issues. I feel very similar, but he’s newer to this shit, so he doesn’t have the same control as someone who has shifted their entire life.”

Maize seemed to consider his words before nodding.

Just one more thing I loved about Maize, how easily she took everything in fucking stride. It was so damn attractive.

I eyed the sky, noticing it was growing darker. “If we are going to get to the Pixie Circle, we should do so soon. A storm is blowing in.”

“How far is it?”

“Not very, but sometimes the pixies can make finding it difficult.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised.

I sighed. “Yeah, you’ll see.”

I had a feeling it was going to be a very long day.

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CHAPTER 10

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MAIZE

Thunder cracked over my head as cold wind whipped my hair around, and small droplets of water that felt like ice hit me like pellets. I shielded my eyes as we continued on our path, my vision blurred by the intense storm that Valerio had predicted. I tightened my fingers around the reins of my horse as I heard Charm call out something from up front as he led us towards the Pixie Circle.

It almost felt like the realm itself didn't want us to reach our destination, and it was infuriating as hell. I hunched forward, squinting through the rain, despite my shoulders seizing up. I knew when we finally stopped, Valerio and Philip were going to be pissed that I had chosen to ignore their idea of pulling off to the side.

I couldn't describe to them the urgency I felt to get here, to meet this woman and hear what she had to say. It felt essential. *Vital.* Like it would change everything. And while that was scary, it also seemed extremely important.

I hoped it was important, because if not, I was putting my mates through this for no reason. The others had taken horses as well but were following up behind. The exception was Cannon, who I occasionally caught a glimpse of as he darted through the trees in wolf form.

Honestly, my magic and I were both extremely intrigued at the idea of spending more time with his wolf. Especially since the last time I'd been so out of it I had barely been able to keep my eyes open.

My thighs tightened around the horse as a crack of thunder had it jolting. I let out a small grunt but held tight, my leather pants slippery in the wet weather. I was suddenly wishing I'd worn warmer clothes. Leaning

forward, I urged my mount to move, despite one of the guys calling out to me. If it wasn't for Charm leading us, I would have absolutely no idea where we were going.

After a few minutes of riding in the storm, I noticed a thick wall of trees up ahead, and Charm's bright hair stood out amongst the stormy weather. I slowed my mount to a stop as I pulled up next to him, the thunder and rain masking my other mates as they approached from behind.

"Where is it?" I yelled out over the wind.

"Through the trees." His voice was loud but still partially masked. "We have to get permission to come in, and we need to figure out where to put the— Shit, Maize, come back here!"

I'd dismounted already, keeping a hand on the reins as I walked up to the trees, allowing my magic to feel out the space. Almost immediately I was met with a surge of power that felt both chaotic yet familiar.

It wasn't fae magic, but it was something very similar…*pixie magic*. Yeah, it was for sure pixie magic, I could feel it now. Allowing my magic to push out, I hissed as the pixie magic turned combative, running over my skin as if feeling me out.

After a moment, the trees broke open, literally crowding to the sides as if the ground itself was moving. I stepped back in surprise, feeling Cannon's wolf brushing against my legs. I put a hand down, running my fingers through his fur, before looking back, finding all my mates watching me in surprise.

"What?" I called out.

"How the hell did you open the pixie circle?" Valerio demanded, his eyes still a bit wild looking. Not that it surprised me—the man was still staring at me as if he didn't understand what I was about. As if I'd confused him earlier. I felt like if anything, things had been clarified, but clearly that was just me.

"No idea!" I walked in without explaining further. I mean, clearly they had let me in, but I felt like now was not the time to go over that. As I stepped through the trees, the storm cut off immediately.

Just gone.

I snapped my head around, realizing that it was almost as if we'd entered a new realm. The entire clearing was filled with this soft, lush grass that seemed to almost be sparkling with lights… No, those weren't lights. They were pixies zooming around, seemingly not noticing my appearance.

Something I didn’t fully believe. I tied my horse to a nearby tree and approached the center of the circle, my mates oddly quiet as I examined the lush space and silent sky above, a clear twilight shade dusted with stars and a full moon. This…this was odd.

“Welcome, daughter of the prophetess.”

The voice was soft, a whisper against my ear, making me turn around only to realize that there was no one near me. Maddox offered me a concerned look, and I tried to remove the confusion from my face, knowing that I no doubt looked a bit crazy. I found myself somewhat frozen, though, not knowing how to handle this…

Suddenly and without warning, a cool wind brushed through the space. I felt an arm wrap around my center, Philip’s magic purring against mine and keeping a territorial hold over me.

The pixies fled to the outer rim of the clearing, and I watched in shock as a stunning emerald and amethyst ball of light seemed to float up from the ground before me, ripping a hole in our dimension.

“Well, that’s a new one for me,” I murmured, watching as it grew seemingly larger until it was a black crack in the very fabric of this realm.

“Are we supposed to just hop into a fucking random portal?” Cannon growled. “That isn’t happening.”

I eyed the massive man and wondered when he’d gotten dressed. I was both disappointed by that, intrigued by how the shifting aspect of that worked, and bummed out that I hadn’t seen his wolf fully.

I narrowed my eyes. “Hey, don’t get all crazy protective on me right now. We have shit to do.”

Cannon’s lips pressed up. “Can I get crazy protective *on* you later, Maize?”

I couldn’t help but smile at that as I turned back towards the rip and nearly jumped back upon seeing a reflection of myself within its surface. Instead of being a blank void, it was now made of a silvery, mercury-like substance. The same one my tears were made of, and I found it oddly beautiful.

As I stepped closer, I could practically feel Cannon wanting to rip me away from the situation. I didn’t completely blame him, but this was also unavoidable. I had to do this. I inhaled sharply, and without warning, walked through the silvery substance.

Everything went dark at once.

The coolness of the portal chilled my skin and left me feeling almost numb, locked into place. My magic tried to break out and rebel, but whatever was transporting us had the ability to not only restrain it but almost drain it of power. If it wasn't for everything telling me I needed to relax, I would probably not only have been mid-panic attack but assumed this had something to do with that psycho Zagan or Oberon.

As it stood, I could feel the soft reassurance that I was beginning to recognize as Cethlenn's magic, wrapping around me.

Closing my eyes, I let myself sink into it, knowing there was nothing I could do about it. Plus, I enjoyed the darkness. Especially when it felt cool and inviting, like silk after a long day in the sun.

My eyes grew heavy as I realized just how long today had been, between Valerio's nonsense and ensuring Brielle's comfortability. Fury lashed through me at the concept of what she'd undergone. I knew Cirdan was pissed, but I didn't care. Those girls needed a home. Stability. Safety. I felt like I needed to offer it to them, even if they didn't end up taking it.

I knew Gray had understood my reasoning. While I didn't know Gray as well as I would like to, she confided in me that she'd undergone abuse by her adopted parents. It was one of the reasons that I'd felt so comforted by her friendship. Both of us had scars, and the way she dealt with them so resiliently made me want to be stronger.

I had, however, been somewhat surprised that Vegas had seemed to understand it as well. I didn't know the Queen's sister very well, but I knew that she was unique, to say the least. Not only was she the only living sorceress, but she was made completely of magic.

I suppose she wasn't Gray's real sister, but you couldn't tell them that. I honestly was a bit intimidated by the woman, which was somewhat hilarious since she was a super tiny bright ball of light that seemed to float between the ten men she'd married, acting as if it was absolutely no big deal that she somehow managed to precariously balance ten successful relationships with a group of seemingly complicated psychopaths.

It was impressive, I wouldn't lie. I mean…I had seven mates, so I guess I wasn't that far from Vegas, but I just felt like the woman balanced everything so much better than I ever could.

That thought did lead me to question what exactly people saw when they interacted with the group of us. It made me happy that our type of

relationship was so accepted, because while it wouldn't have changed my mindset about my mates, I already stood out enough as it is.

That was a problem I had no idea how to solve. I mean, it was clear that I was staying. Not only for my mates, but to make this my home. How was I going to do that, though? After we killed Zagan and figured out this Oberon thing, where would that leave me? Sure, not everyone was as hateful as David, but it still didn't mean I fit in there or had a place. I needed to do something for myself. I just wasn't positive what that would be.

Maybe I would talk to Gray. She always—

Before my thoughts could continue, I slammed into a hard surface, my knees breaking as I landed on cold marble. I groaned, rolling on my back, realizing that I was in fact out of the portal. *No shit, Maize.* Muffled groans and grunts surrounded me as my mates followed suit, and when Cannon grabbed me by the waist, I looked up into his bright, burning eyes.

"You okay?" he asked roughly, his eyes darkening.

"Pretty durable, even after everything," I tried to tease as his eyes sparkled with a wild darkness and heat. My toes curled as he pressed his forehead to mine and his chest let out a low rumble.

"Cannon, bud." Chait's voice was filled with a bit of concern. "You good?"

Why wouldn't he be good?

I frowned, tilting my head to see his expression, but trying to put any distance wasn't successful because Cannon's nose was now pressed in my hair as his chest vibrated with almost a purring sensation. His fingers were firm on my waist as I examined the way he was possessively looking down at me.

"No," Cannon admitted. "I don't like being down here, especially after everything that's happened. I've been trying so goddamn hard to keep my wolf relaxed, but clearly I am failing."

Instantly I felt guilty, wondering if it'd been a good idea for them to come down here with me. I didn't think being separate would help either, though.

Before I could comment on his statement, the room around us filled with a cool energy and Cannon loosened his hold on me slightly, allowing me to turn and look into the space we'd arrived in. I frowned, realizing that while I didn't recognize the place fully, there was something familiar about

it. The floors were a cool, black marble, and the walls were shaded in shadows and velvet curtains. The ceiling was dark, and I couldn't see where it stopped except for small twinkling lights that almost appeared as stars.

I would have enjoyed it if it wasn't for the eerie feeling that someone was here with us. My mates must have felt it as well, because they all seemed to move closer protectively. I eyed the corners of the room, not feeling scared, exactly, but somewhat hesitant.

"Hello? Cethlenn?" I called her name out, and almost immediately the power surged forward, a pop sounding in the room as the scent of snow filled the space. A pale light illuminated the space as I shielded my gaze, a pool of mercury forming in the center of the floor in front of us.

I was confused at first, before a dark head of hair pushed out of the silvery surface and Cethlenn's entire frame began to rise from it, her gaze holding mine. I nearly muttered a curse at how intense the moment was, but instead just offered her a blank look, not really wanting to react.

I mean, what the hell would I say?

'Hey random forest and/or mirror lady, it's really good and somewhat odd to see you in person, especially since this really doesn't feel like it's in person, but you get my point. Anyway—'

"Maize." Her face lit up in surprise and happiness. "You made it."

I started to take a step forward, but Cannon's hand caught my waist as a growl came from his throat. I didn't try to approach any further but did say, "You made it sound urgent."

"It is." She nodded. "But you could have chosen not to come."

I nodded slowly, feeling cautious now. "So what exactly is all of this about?"

"Right," she said, snapping her fingers and creating a large seating area that I got comfortable on, my mates spread out behind me, her eyes still not moving from me. I wasn't positive why she was ignoring them, but it may have been because they seemed a bit feral right now, their energy running across my skin dangerously. I tried to ignore it, but I wouldn't lie, it was turning me on. Completely on par with how I'd been acting recently.

"So." She fixed me with a look. "I have a favor to ask of you, Maize… All of you."

I think she meant my mates, but she was essentially still ignoring them.

"Okay?" I frowned.

Her magic seeped out as a large rip in reality formed again, this time turning into a door. She walked over and opened it, revealing four figures dressed in black cloaks that were…children? I mean, clearly, because they were small, maybe five years old at most. They looked around, a bit freaked out obviously, and crowded around the woman nervously. When she gently led them towards the couch across from us and had them sit down, they put down their hoods, and my eyes widened. Honestly, it was a bit freaky how much they looked…well, like me. Like her.

I really didn't have a good feeling on where this was headed.

"Maize, please meet Cairo," she explained, motioning to the boy who sat in the center. His gaze was solely focused on me as if he was analyzing my reaction to him, his skin covered in what appeared to be runes, but I had a feeling they weren't tattooed on. No, these markings seemed natural to his skin. Like a freckle or birthmark.

I didn't know what language they were in, but it wasn't one I had seen ever before. His hair was as dark as mine and his presumed mother's, but his eyes were a mossy color with black streaks. In all regards he should have been considered a normal kid, but there was something off about him, and it wasn't just the knowledge in his gaze. There was almost a haunted element to his expression, as if he had already seen far too much, and it made me far more protective than I would have expected.

"And this is Relic," she continued as my gaze moved to the boy who sat to his right. Immediately I tilted my head, finding that despite them all looking the same age, he probably looked the most different out of all the boys. His gaze was less knowing than Cairo's and far more curious, looking over my mates with a speculative and cautious expression. His hair was a pure silver color, but his eyes were almost the exact same shade as my own, their surface almost mirror-like in nature. It was a bit uncomfortable because it was like seeing my own face in the mirror.

"This is Lyric." My gaze moved to the boy to Cairo's left, his posture rigid and his gaze solely on Maddox, who now sat next to me. Lyric's head tilted in an almost clinical fashion. I looked to my mate, who seemed more amused than anything, his hand squeezing mine as I looked back at the somewhat odd kid. His hair was parted neatly to the side, as dark as mine, his eyes an emerald green streaked with gold. Well, one of them was. The other was pure white, and the skin above and below was scarred with a

silver wound. I frowned, wanting to know where exactly that had come from, but decided that was probably a somewhat sensitive question.

After all, I didn't like people asking about my wounds.

"And this right here is Harland." I finally looked at the last kid, who was smaller than the rest, curled into a blanket and looking terrified. His blue eyes were bigger than the rest of his face, and his skin was almost paper white. He was nearly shaking with what appeared to be nervousness as he continued to look at his mom before looking back at me. I couldn't tell what type of magic these boys had, but I could feel he was particularly volatile. It didn't seem possible for someone that small to be that dangerous.

"Nice to meet you guys," I offered. They all stared at me wide-eyed, as if they were surprised by my voice. I met Cethlenn's gaze, who was watching me with hope. "I still don't understand why we needed to come down here—"

"There is trouble coming to the realms soon. Not today or tomorrow, but soon. I fear I will not be able to protect the four of them as I normally would. Balor will be caught up in trouble, and these boys will be an immediate target." Her blunt words had me playing catch up as I blinked, trying to process the concern in her voice.

"Balor?"

"My husband and their father." She hesitated over the last word.

"Okay… And trouble—what kind of trouble, and why would they be targets?"

"I can't explain everything, Maize, but these boys are fundamental to the realm's future and its survival. Without them, we won't survive the trouble on the way."

"That is extremely vague." I hesitated. "So what do you need me to do?"

"Watch them. Raise them. I need you to take care of your brothers."

What?

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CHAPTER 11

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PHILIP

"I'm sorry, what?"

Maize's voice was shocked, going a bit more high-pitched at the end of her question. Not that I blamed her since the rational part of my brain was also surprised by what this odd woman was saying. However, instead of focusing on that, my gaze was narrowed on the kid sitting closest to the center. Cairo, was it?

He was extremely dangerous, even for a child. Especially dangerous, even, since kids could be so damn volatile and emotional. Because of this, I found myself fighting the urge to draw Maize protectively against my chest. I managed to hold back, though, and remind myself that not only were these innocent children, but apparently, possibly… Maize's brothers? How the hell did that work?

I mean, it wouldn't have surprised me fully on a magic aspect. These boys were ridiculously powerful, and my own magic found them threatening because of the deadly nature of their magic. It was intense enough that it concerned me, and that's saying something.

My brow dipped slightly as I tried to be a bit more understanding and rational instead of overreacting in accordance to my magic. After all, Maize had deadly magic, and she was perfectly safe to be around.

Okay, that wasn't completely true. Still, I needed to be more empathetic here.

Each one of us had terrifying magic in its own respect, but it didn't make any of us bad people…for the most part. Although, honestly, my motives for most things recently were up for debate since they all revolved around one woman. The woman who somehow hadn't realized just how

goddamn crazy I was about her. My eyes darted down to the back of her head as I fought the urge to reach forward and run my fingers through her thick locks. She really had gorgeous hair. Hair that would look even better wrapped around my fist as I fucked her from behind…

"I don't understand," Maize stated quietly, drawing my attention back to the moment at hand. Namely, that this woman was claiming we needed to raise these young boys. I mean, did I agree that they needed guidance on how to use their magic and how to control it? Of course. *But raising them?* I mean, shit. I'd never had siblings, let alone any knowledge on being able to raise a child…or multiple children, in this case. I wasn't against the concept either, if Maize agreed, but fuck it was terrifying a bit.

I mean, what if we messed up? I could feel the tension rolling through Maize's frame, so I did what I hoped would help and ran my fingers over the nape of her neck as she leaned back against me.

I exchanged a look with Charm, who was hovering anxiously. The poor bastard really was getting more emotionally distressed as the days went on. I was starting to understand why he'd been so hesitant to admit his feelings for Maize—the man really didn't have his shit together.

Not that I did either, but I had embraced the intensity of my emotions, and I wasn't alone. Cannon was about two steps away from going full wolf on her sweet ass, Maddox was essentially feral at this point, and Valerio had just lost it. I would give them credit enough to say that they managed to hide it from her…mostly. Well, until Valerio did his thing. I couldn't believe the man had tried to collar her.

Not that I wouldn't love to have control over her sexy frame, but that isn't how I would go about it. I could count on Chait and Zed to an extent, but the first was just attached to Maize, and the latter still seemed completely out of it, satisfied with the turn of events in Maize marking him but exhausted and still a bit beat up.

"Why us?" I asked before Cethlenn could answer her. Everyone looked at me, so I continued. "You said they are a target, so why are we the ones you picked to protect them? I don't believe it's because they're her brothers, or not completely."

I still didn't even believe that she literally meant her brothers yet, either.

The woman's gaze was intense on me, but not unfriendly. Just searching. Her answer wasn't one I completely expected when she finally answered.

“You eight are powerful enough to contain their magic, and I believe you are skilled enough to help them. They have a long road ahead of them, and the Horde is relatively safe. Maize understands better than anyone what it’s like to have magic that is unusual and feared. I believe most of you do as well. You are unique individuals, and these boys are very much the same. While it’s true these are Maize’s brothers, the reasoning is far larger than that. I’ve seen that this is the only way for them to be where they need to be in the future.”

That last part was impossibly vague.

“What type of magic do they have?” Valerio’s voice sounded oddly calm, and when I looked over at him, he wasn’t worried at all. In fact, if anything he looked curious. You would have thought he would be more stressed since he was being asked to essentially bring four young children under the guidance of our team, but somehow this was the thing he was able to stay completely relaxed about.

“Boys, would you like to tell them yourselves?”

“No,” the last kid, Harland, squeaked out. His eyes were massive as he sank further into the couch. I eyed him in confusion, wondering why he looked so damn scared, as Maddox leaned forward, offering him a concerned look.

“We aren’t going to kill you for your own damn magic, kid.” My teammate sounded upset as he continued, “You can’t control the thoughts your magic puts in your head. That’s not your fault.”

“You can read my mind?” Harland looked even more panicked.

See? We were already screwing it up.

“What type of thoughts?” Cannon asked curiously. I could see that his gaze had gone from wolfy to far more clinical. None of us were unfamiliar working with kids. Sure, the Academy recruits were a bit older, but we were teachers at the base of it all, and I could feel all of us slipping into that mindset. It also was starting to become clear to me why this lady thought this was a good idea. Despite my protective instincts warning against how dangerous they seemed, the idea of helping them figure out their magic and train with it did sound like the right move. I just wasn’t sure how this would fit into our life outside of normal ‘schooling.’

Harland looked at his brothers, who all seemed to offer different versions of encouraging nods. He swallowed. “Blood. Lots of blood.

Violence. War. Suffering. I like…I like seeing the suffering that's occurred throughout the history of the realms."

Well, shit.

His mother put a calming hand on his shoulder. "The boys' magic is different from both his father's and mine. It was something I should have seen, considering the vision I had so long ago."

"Vision?" Maize asked quietly.

"As you know, humans often draw inspiration from the Demonic realm for their stories, and they aren't usually that far from truth. There are demons who symbolize the traits of the seven sins, and primordial demons who contain aspects far darker than that. When I had a vision of four horsemen and then found out I was pregnant with quadruplets, I should have realized what it would bring. The demonic entities who inspired the original four horsemen faded over time, but now they have been reborn. Their magic and purpose reside in my sons."

"The four horsemen," Charm mumbled. "Of the apocalypse? Like the people who supposedly bring an end to the Earth realm?"

Wonderful. That was exactly what I liked to hear. Completely appeased my concerns.

"Inspired from there, yes, but the books have it wrong…they aren't going to ruin it, they are going to save it." She smiled softly at them. "But yes, they are the four horsemen, which is why they are going to be targeted, because they have an immense amount of uncontrollable power, and all too soon they will be able to tap into it. Harland's visions of warfare, conquest, and bloodlust are nothing compared to what he will be able to do in the future when he can level entire civilizations."

"Holy hell," Maize muttered.

"And the others?" Zed demanded quietly from next to me.

"Lyric is traditionally known as pestilence…currently he is gaining the ability to make individuals ill to the point of near death. It won't stop there though. He will be able to control bacteria, spread disease, and cause individuals to grow deathly ill, having an immediate hold of their body, seizing control completely."

Fuck. That was horrible.

"Relic, on the other hand, is known as famine." She offered the boy a soft smile as he continued to examine the group curiously. "He will be able to drive someone to kill themselves through *want* alone, projecting one's

desires and hanging it in front of them, but always out of reach. He will be able to drain water, kill crops, and deprive the human body of even its own blood. His magic will drain life from everything around it almost completely."

I blew out a breath, not even knowing how you would go about training magic like that. Did we have some enemies that we could use for practice? I mean, maybe if we found more SE guards that had worked with Richard Flank…

"But not to death." Cairo spoke up with an easy manner that really seemed to make him seem older than he was, pulling me from my thoughts. "That's me. I'm death."

And hell, did I believe it.

"Cairo's powers are extremely well mastered so far, but if he does lose control, he could cause an entire realm to drop dead. He's nothing like any necromancer or death mage you've ever met. He has complete control over the Spirit realm and is far more like a reaper than anything."

"And you want them to come to the Horde?" Maize asked. She didn't seem surprised, exactly, at Cethlenn's request, just confused. I was as well. I mean, why the hell did this lady think these overpowered kids were going to be safe in the Horde?

"They belong in the Horde; their future lies there along with their safety. If they are anywhere else, they will die, and the world really will come to an end, and not just the human one," their mother explained.

"How are we supposed to help them?" Charm asked.

"Aren't you capable of seeing one's desires? Surely you could aid in Relic's training. And I know Valerio feeds off fear, so I am positive that he could help train Harland." She dismissed his question easily. "All of you have skills that could help. Even you, Maize."

"This…is a lot," my mate murmured.

"Your brothers need your mates and you," Cethlenn stated quietly.

Maize looked at all of us before turning back to the woman. "Okay."

"Really?" The woman tilted her head in surprise.

"They are fuc—*freakin*' kids, and they are extremely dangerous. Their life is in literal danger, and they are apparently my brothers…I mean, how the hell am I supposed to say no to that?" she demanded.

The woman smiled softly. "Thank you, Maize. I knew you would understand."

“So what now? Do we just bring them home? What the hell do I tell people? How do I explain why I am raising them? I mean, you haven’t even explained the question that you know I want a goddamn answer to.”

Ah, yes. The elephant in the room.

If these were her brothers and Cethlenn was their mother… Was this Maize’s mother as well? Was this Balor guy just the boys’ father, or did this somehow affect the situation with Mario? I mean, these were pretty fucking important questions.

“No one will question you,” the woman insisted with a firm look. “And anyone who does and pushes it is worthy of telling.”

“The Horde isn’t as safe as you assume,” Maize admitted. “I am being hunted, a coup is taking place soon, and Oberon popped in my dreams like it was nothing.”

Cethlenn sighed. “That is far safer than what is coming in the future. Trust me.”

“So vague,” I muttered. Everything was so vague with this lady.

“I wish I could explain more,’’ Cethlenn directed towards me. “But for now, you must go. Maize, when this is more settled, I promise I will come and explain everything. Do you trust me?”

Maize’s expression was tired, but she nodded as the woman offered a smile and walked around, crouching in front of the boys. “Boys, I love all of you so much, I promise you will be safe with Maize and her mates. I will make sure your things are delivered, but please promise me that you won’t hurt anyone in the Horde?

She paused for a minute before adding, “Well, unless they deserve it.”

At least there was one thing we all saw eye to eye on for parenting.

“I love you Mommy.” Harland launched himself at his mother as we straightened ourselves up, the couch disappearing and leaving us standing in the middle of the large room. Honestly, I couldn’t lie, I was a bit jealous that I couldn’t just make shit appear and disappear like that.

“Be good.” She hugged Relic and then Lyric. “Keep an eye on Harland, and maybe all sleep in the same room for now—it usually means he has less nightmares.”

“We’ve got this, Mom,” Cairo insisted as I watched the entire interaction with a bit of surprise. I mean, I shouldn’t have been surprised, because they were children, but…seeing the embodiment of death,

pestilence, famine, and war being hugged by their mom was a bit odd, to say the least.

Walking up to Maize, I wrapped my arms around her waist. She gazed up at me with a soft look that had emotion and confusion brimming at the surface. Our girl was so damn strong, even if she was confused right now. She knew in her heart how to handle things, how to do the right thing, and stood with it.

“Alright, they’re ready.” Their mom looked at us.

Maize stepped forward and offered them a small smile. “Alright guys, let’s show you your new home.”

When we had first been given this house as an official Red Masques team, I had never given thought to what it would be like to have children in it. Now, though, it was a reality, and standing in the kitchen, eyeing the doorway of the large guest bedroom on our first floor, I found it fairly fascinating to watch my teammates help them set up.

Within a few hours, the room had been transformed into a massive dorm space that featured four twin beds that we’d rustled up from the dorms. Their mom had portalled a few items here automatically, which was not only cool, but begged the question on why she hadn’t been able to just transfer us directly home from the Demonic realm? Not that I would ever get that answer, but traveling back on horseback with our four new guests had been a bit difficult, especially considering the storm.

I nearly shook my head at that, wondering how we were going to manage to live the life we did and keep these kids safe. Once we had taken ourselves out of the field, things had calmed down, but the Academy still wasn’t safe by any means. I mean, hell, fae weren’t safe…we weren’t human. Anyone who thought so would be sorely disappointed on how shit goes down around here, because most of it is solved by violence. I had never minded it.

Now, though? The idea of exposing four young kids to it? That worried me a bit.

It seemed so far we were doing a good job, because all of them were dressed in warm clothes, had a roof over their heads, and dinner was in the oven… So that was something, right?

“Yeah, I promise.” Chait chuckled, leading Harland from the room as the kid practically bounced next to him, holding onto his stuffed animal. It wasn’t an animal I recognized, though. I think it may have been a hellhound…that was actually pretty cool.

“But why can’t we just have it now?” He frowned and then eyed the fridge and freezer combo. “Mommy sometimes lets me have ice cream before dinner.”

“No she doesn’t!” Relic called out as Zed offered me a smile from where he and Charm were helping him set up his vast collection of toys. The boxes their mom had sent had been deceptively small.

“They don’t know that,” Lyric pointed out. He was already settled on his neatly made bed, reading some heavy book. The kid had his own personal library that he’d set up to either side of his bed. In fact, I had a feeling if I went in there, all four corners of the room would be vastly different. It was pretty easy to get an understanding of the things they liked.

Already it was obvious that Relic enjoyed collecting items and Lyric enjoyed reading. I had absolutely no idea what Harland was into, but he seemed like a pretty normal kid so far. Just one that literally dreamed of bloodshed and war constantly. But he had a stuffed animal hellhound, so that evened it out…mostly.

“No ice cream,” Cairo called out, coming down the stairs, Maize next to him and smiling at something Maddox was saying to her. Valerio followed after him as he offered a small head shake, making me wonder what the kid had been doing up there.

“He’s interesting,” Valerio noted as he came to lean against the counter next to me, Cairo disappearing into the bedroom.

“They all are.” I tilted my head and looked at him. “Do you think we can do this?”

“Yeah.” Valerio nodded confidently, making me feel way better.

I turned slightly to say something to Maize, her voice echoing through the space as she talked to Chait, but instead collided with Harland. Shit. He bounced back and he offered me a fearful look.

“You have dream magic,” he noted immediately.

“And you have the ability to see magic?” Valerio offered curiously.

“Yes.” He nodded cautiously, and then looked at Valerio. “What type of magic do you have? Mommy said you guys were dangerous and that we needed to make sure we behaved.”

She wasn’t wrong about us being dangerous, but I didn’t want him thinking we were dangerous to *them*.

“Dangerous, but not to you guys,” I promised as Valerio nodded.

“Hopefully we can help you guys out,” Valerio explained. “We have never done this before, so you guys will just have to let us know what you need.”

“What I need?” He blinked.

“He’s maybe five,” Maize mused, rounding the counter. “I’m not sure __”

“I’m actually almost seven,” Harland pointed out.

“Harland!” Cairo called. “Come here.”

The kid disappeared, leaving me with my mate, who came up to me and buried her head against my chest, letting out a small, tired sigh. Valerio kissed her head in passing before walking towards the bedroom, clearly not done with that conversation. I would bet a million dollars that Cairo and he clashed as the kid grew older, especially since he was the designated leader of their little group.

Maize suddenly deflated against me, and I looked down at her face, offering her a concerned look.

“I have no idea what to do with any of this. I feel like I have a million questions, and I may never get the answers. I am worried about everything to come, and I’m concerned we will never just have normalcy. That you guys will resent me for that.”

“I promise you, Maize, that we will have a normal life…or as normal as we can manage. If that’s what you want, it’s what I’ll make sure we have.”

Her soft smile was everything as she went up on her toes and melded our lips together. I cupped her jaw and groaned into her taste before pressing my forehead to hers.

“Gross.”

I pulled back and looked over to see Lyric staring at us with a critical eye as he passed us, heading towards the living room. Maize let out an amused laugh as I offered a small sigh.

Yeah, this was going to be interesting.

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CHAPTER 12

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MAIZE

"*Allons nous coucher maintenant, tu as l'air épuisé*." Chait's voice played against my skin as he caged me against the bathroom counter from behind, his magic rubbing against mine like some exotic cat. I learned back into him, unable to stop myself from soaking up the affection he offered. The man was beyond addictive. All at once, it felt like there were hands on me, touching my skin in a soothing and persuasive way. When his lips brushed against my neck, a shiver worked its way over my skin and caused my knees to nearly break. I gripped the stone counter harder as I felt him harden behind me, his lips pressing to my shoulder.

I swallowed, feeling almost dizzy with his touch. "Yeah, is that what you had in mind?" I absolutely knew sleeping was not what Chait was thinking.

Before he could say anything else though, yelling ensued downstairs. I tried to move from the bathroom, knowing it was the boys, but Chait chuckled and caught me against him, pressing his forehead to mine. "Maize, you need to relax."

"I'm worried about them," I admitted. "I mean, they are clearly upset __"

"No matter how powerful these boys are," Chait explained easily, "they are still kids. Specifically, six-year-old boys. They are going to fight a fuck-ton, and as they get older, it's only going to get more violent and more physical. That's what we are here for. Trust me—if we can break up a fight between Maddox and Charm, we can manage it with them."

His words did a lot to settle me, I wouldn't lie.

“I just want them to feel safe,” I whispered.

I knew what it was like to have an unstable childhood and to not feel wanted. I didn’t want the boys to feel as if they’d just been left here by their mom with people who didn’t care about them. Plus, it had become very clear to me, as we grew closer to bedtime, that Harland suffered from nightmares. The way that he had clung onto me after we watched a movie had both concerned me and made me feel a surge of maternal affection towards him.

Out of all the boys, he was probably the only one who acted the most like his age. Lyric and Relic both seemed older in their own right, and Cairo… I could be convinced he was an adult who was just pretending to be six. The kid seemed to have an endless supply of knowledge that I had to assume came from the Spirit realm.

Chait let out a soft sound, turning me into him and running his fingers up my neck to hold my jaw more firmly. “Maize, I promise you, they feel safe. Not just because of us, but because they know what they are capable of. If they weren’t six, I would say they were completely competent at taking care of one another. Even at this age they are extremely dangerous, and that is a good defense measure when you don’t know how to fight offensively.”

I frowned. “You really think they are that dangerous?”

I felt protective over the boys, and not just because they were my brothers, which was an entire can of worms I was not ready to dive into just yet. Still, no matter their relationship, I knew their magic was the type to inspire fear, and it would do so for the rest of their lives. They would always be viewed as dangerous and as toxic to others. It was a difficult way to live, and I wanted to somehow provide for them a space where they didn’t have to feel so different.

Honestly, as taken off guard by all of this as I was, it felt right to give them a safe place. A home where they didn’t have to worry about their own well-being every day.

“I know they are dangerous.” Chait smirked before turning more serious. “But that doesn’t change the fact that this is their home, and we are going to do our damn best to make sure they feel safe and welcome here.”

He was right. It also spurred thoughts of something else I still felt was a bit unhandled.

“You’re right.” I let out a slow exhale before looking up at him. “Would you mind walking with me to Brielle’s? I would go alone, but it may send Valerio into a tailspin, and I desperately need to get some fresh air.”

“Don’t have to ask me twice.” He winked and pulled me close. In a snap, the entire space around us went dark, a cool, chilled magic brushing over my skin as I leaned completely into his frame. If he was talking to me, I couldn’t hear him, but feeling him under my touch was assurance enough that he was still with me.

In a long second, everything seemed to snap back to normal, and we landed in a large, open clearing, the small cottage from earlier in the day making the entire place glow with a welcoming, warm light. This afternoon seemed so long ago.

Almost immediately, Brielle was opening the door with a big smile on her face. She seemed far more relaxed than earlier, and I wasn’t surprised in the least. Earlier had been a bit ‘much’ for several reasons.

Don’t get me wrong, I loved Vegas, but she was objectively intimidating, especially if you didn’t know her. Of course, it didn’t help that she had ten men around her that seemed slightly more than psychopathic. I liked most of her husbands—hell, several of them had freed me from my imprisonment when they took over my father’s castle—but that didn’t take away from the fact that they had a few screws loose.

I suppose it made sense though. I was almost positive Vegas was insane herself, and that’s coming from a woman who took pleasure in poisoning and marking her mates.

Alright, to be fair, I still felt guilty about it, but less so than I used to. It helped that my men were so adamant about being okay with me poisoning them… And I was starting to think I was just surrounded by fucking crazy people. *Maker.*

“Hey!” Brielle smiled as we walked towards the small cottage. “I didn’t realize you would be back so soon. The girls just went to bed.”

I had promised her I would come back to check in. It probably could have waited until tomorrow, but the day had been long and complicated, I wanted it to end on the note of knowing that Brielle and her sisters were safe.

“I just wanted to check in and make sure you were doing okay,” I explained as she led us inside and I knocked snow off my shoes. “Well, that and to make sure Cirdan hadn’t kidnapped you and moved you out.”

That earned me an amused scoff that had me knowing that the situation wasn't as serious as I'd assumed.

Sitting down on the couch, Chait began to roam the room, looking at the massive bookcase that surrounded the fireplace and leaving us to talk. Honestly, there was a lot to explore in this small place.

The high, arched ceilings had these massive wooden beams that complemented the stone walls and wood floors. There was comfortable furniture everywhere, and the lighting was warm, each and every element of this house seemingly handpicked to be comfortable and inviting. I had a feeling Vegas had played a part in that.

"Oh he wants to." Brielle sighed and ran a hand over her face. "I think I hurt his feelings. He had invited us—okay, *invited* is the wrong word. He had *demanded* we come live with them, but I knew this was the right choice. I have no doubt they could keep us safe, but I don't want the girls to feel like they have to rely on someone bigger or scarier to keep them safe. Usually those people just let you down. Besides, my sisters already think they walk on water, and I worry that living with them could end up confusing them."

"Confuse them?" I questioned.

"People don't stay around, and the ones that do aren't reliable. I worry they would start believing they are and only end up being heartbroken when we get tossed out," she whispered and then snapped her gaze up to me. "No offense, I mean mostly men. Namely men who continuously try to convince me that we are meant to be together. Something that isn't possible."

"Not possible?" I had a feeling why she thought that, but I also didn't want to assume. Chait clearly was not of the same mindset, though, because the humor radiating through the bond between us almost had me smiling. It wasn't humor at Brielle's thought process—no, it was at how she thought Cirdan was going to let her decide that. I didn't know the man well, but it was extremely clear that he wasn't giving this battle up.

Brielle deflated into the couch cushions. "Yeah, not possible. Not for someone like me. Plus, can you really trust the emotions of men who are like three hundred or something like that?" Her eyes turned darker as she shook her head. "I learned long ago to not trust men, especially ones that seem like they want to offer you everything. No man expresses that type of commitment and devotion to a woman off the bat and doesn't want something in return. Even if they mean it right now, they could decide

tomorrow that they are over this…over me. Something I could deal with. But I won't see my sisters' trust broken because the immortal witch crew decided that their entertainment of the decade got boring."

Oh man, I had a feeling that Brielle was so off base it wasn't even funny.

"I don't think that's completely true," I hedged.

"In my life, it is." She sighed. "But it doesn't matter. I'm just glad we have a space for ourselves. Plus, with the girls starting school here, it will be a good home base for them."

I could see how firm she was on her thoughts, so I decided to move on for the time being. "What about you? What's your plan?"

"Vegas said I could pick what team I wanted to be part of…but most of them are all men, and between us, I know if I joined any other team besides Cirdan's, he would probably kill them. He sort of looks for excuses to do shit like that."

"Cirdan is violent, but usually not without cause. In his mind, at least," Chait said, causing Brielle to jump slightly as if she'd forgotten he was there.

"I have seen him be really violent in the past few days," Brielle hedged, not looking exactly upset about the fact, but not looking thrilled either.

"Like I said, not without cause in his mind." Chait shrugged as Brielle's expression turned thoughtful.

Standing up, I stretched my arms above my head and yawned. Chait wasn't wrong—I was exhausted. "How about we train tomorrow while the girls are in classes? What time do you normally wake up at?"

A haunted look passed her face. "I don't usually sleep, if we are being honest."

Damn, sometimes I really thought we were far too alike.

"How about noon?"

"That works." She offered me a hug, and as Chait and I walked out, I realized that we weren't alone. I arched a brow at Chait, who chuckled softly, making me realize he'd known Cirdan was outside the entire time.

The witch offered both of us a nod but didn't say anything else, resting against the side of the cottage with his eyes closed. As we continued to distance ourselves from the space, I finally asked the question I'd been meaning to.

“Are Cirdan and his team safe? I don’t want her or the girls in any more danger.”

“Safe?” Chait mused. “No. For them? Yes. None of them will hurt Brielle or her sisters. Not on purpose, at least, but emotionally may be different. That girl has been through way too much.”

Coming from Chait, that said something.

I squeezed his hand as he tucked me against him and pressed a kiss to my forehead, liking that we had decided to take the long way back.

By the time we reached our house, I was chilled. I leaned into him as he urged us inside, taking my hands in his and kissing them softly, warming them with his lips. I should have gone to my bed, but instead I let Chait lead me towards his room, and all too soon, I was curled up against him and sleeping.

“Maize.” The voice was unfamiliar, and it scared the hell out of me. I swallowed down my panic and fear as a sense of dread infiltrated every pore of my being. My eyes were heavy, and as I tried to open them my breath caught, finding myself caged to a bed, pinned by the man from my dream.

Oberon. Oh, this wasn’t good. This was so, so not good.

“Get off me,” I demanded, my voice strained with an effort that seemed to only make him smile more. I tried to squirm away, but his body was heavy, and panic began to invade my senses, causing my vision to blur as I struggled to get away from him.

“Wake her up. Now.” Chait’s voice broke through the haze, but I was quickly dragged back under. My familiars were both standing guard, silent in my head, trying their best to keep out the foreign magic. Their voices weren’t reaching my ears, and I fought the urge to pull at them more, worried about removing their attention away from Oberon’s influence…

o, no, no.” Oberon’s voice was chastising. “I am not letting you go just—“

“N

Philip’s magic slammed against my mental barriers, and a strangled sound came from my throat as I let him in, allowing him to invade every element of my being all at once. I could feel tears streaming down my face as authentic fear coursed through me, causing me to hyperventilate. I reached out, trying to stabilize myself as I came into contact with Chait’s firm muscular chest, my breathing uneven as I leaned into him.

“Breathe.” Philip’s voice was harsh and deep. “Fuck. This bastard is unbelievable.”

Instead of allowing myself to delve into his words, I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to curl up between the two of them as much as possible, not caring where I was. All I cared about was that the two of them were here and protecting me from a much larger danger. Oberon was a threat I had no idea how to deal with, but an instinctual part of me recognized that it was an extremely dangerous one.

One that could mean the end of everything for me.

A moan left my throat as suddenly, firm lips pressed against mine, as I realized that somehow I’d landed myself in Chait’s lap. I could feel how hard he was underneath me, and I unabashedly rolled my rips, loving the feeling of his length against my center. My magic lit up with delight, pushing away the panic, as suddenly another pair of lips traced the back of my neck and had everything inside of me turning into a pool of melted liquid. *Holy hell*.

“Maize.” Chait’s voice was rough. “I need you to open your eyes.”

My hands tightened in his hair as I let my head fall back, loving the feeling of Philip’s hands cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples into tight points underneath my loose shirt. I needed the assurance that they were here with me and that I wasn’t in that dream state, trapped and caged by… No. I wasn’t going to think about him.

Chait hissed as I tightened my grip on his hair, and his head dipped against my neck, his teeth digging into my skin hard enough that I

whimpered, my magic latching onto both of them.

“Little rose.” Philip’s voice was a soft hiss as he tightened my hair in his fist. “We need to know you’re here fully. Tell me you want this.”

“I’m here.” I gasped as Chait’s hands pushed up my shirt and Philip moved his grip down to my waist, Chait’s mouth replacing his fingers. “I need—I need this.”

I couldn’t tell you what exactly I needed besides them, but I wanted to feel every part of them. Their magic was so different, yet complemented mine in a weird, almost toxically good mix that had my toes curling.

My breathing went rough as my shirt was tossed off, and I was left in just a pair of panties. Philip, who was behind me, wrapped his hand around my throat and tilted my head back so he could kiss my lips, hard and demanding.

“Fuck,” Chait growled. “You smell so damn good, Maize.”

“I bet she tastes better,” Philip murmured, making me jolt as his fingers snapped the sides of my panties and tossed them, exposing me completely to the cool air of the room. I whimpered as Philip’s hand slid down my ass, gripping it hard, before burying a finger inside of my channel and causing me to tilt forward, Chait’s hands gripping my face. He kissed me, hard and demanding, causing me to completely give in to whatever insanity this was. When I felt two phantom hands push my legs apart more, allowing Philip better access, I knew I was in trouble.

“No moving,” Chait demanded, my hands being pulled behind me as he slid back off the bed. He gently lowered me forward, Philip’s fingers continuing to pump in and out of me as I laid completely exposed to him, unable to steady myself on my hands. I pushed my ass up further against him as I met Chait’s gaze, his eyes heating on me as he pushed down his boxers to reveal his…holy hell, his tattooed and pierced cock. Oh, I didn’t even need to consider why I found that so hot.

“Do you like that, Maize?” Philip’s voice was smoky and smooth against my ear as he caged me from above. “Do you like knowing how much you turn us on?”

“Yes,” I whimpered needily.

“Why don’t you show Chait how much you like it?” I could practically hear the bastard’s amusement, and when my hands were released, I automatically pushed up and came face to…well, cock, with Chait.

The look in his eyes was far more dominant than I expected, and I let out a moan as Philip's hand wrapped in my hair and he angled my face so my lips were brushing over the pierced tip, causing Chait's throat to produce a low growl.

"Open up, Maize." Chait's voice was dark, and his magic saturated the space in a warm, molten cocoon that had my lips popping open. The taste of his precum instantly had everything inside of me heating as he punched his hips forward. I gagged on his length, causing me to let out a surprised sound at how deep I was able to take him. Philip's lips began to trace down my back as I slid my lips around Chait, pulling a deep, feral sound from his throat as I continued to slide him in and out of my throat.

"Oh fuck," he snarled. "You are so damn good at this."

"She looks fucking amazing," Philip groaned, and I let out a small cry as his tongue was suddenly against my slit and he began to devour my pussy. I tensed at the pure desire coursing through me, and when I tried to tug away, feeling overwhelmed but taking Chait deeper, Philip let out a vaguely threatening noise, locking my legs into place as he dove back between my legs.

I looked up at Chait, his fingers hard on my jaw as he continued to slide his cock in and out of my lips, his breathing rough and a wild look on his face that had my entire body building up into something extremely dangerous. I felt my toes curl and my clit pulse as I could feel my climax—

"No," I whimpered as Philip pulled away, chuckling before leaving me with my lips wrapped around Chait, on the edge of climax.

"That was mean." Chait sounded thrilled as he continued to look at my lips. "Especially with how damn good she's being."

"Are you mad at me, little rose?" Philip's voice had me tensing at how close he was, and I could feel his hard cock, bare against my center. My entire being lit up, knowing he was so close to making me feel amazing.

"Maybe," I moaned as Chait pulled out, watching with damn near fascination as he ran the tip of his cock over my lips.

"Let me fix that."

I cried out—or tried to—but Chait slid back into my mouth, burying himself in my throat as Philip slammed home inside of me. The room went dizzy as my knees felt weak, and my orgasm railed into me, causing everything to go in and out of focus.

I gripped the bedding and felt tears well in my eyes as Chait held himself inside of me, watching my reaction with pure heat as Philip began to pump into me, hard. Hard enough that it felt like it was stretching me and leaving me in a permanent state of need. It didn't matter that I just came. I could feel it building again.

"Fuck, you are so gorgeous," Chait groaned, stroking his cock inside of my mouth as he let out a low sound. "I swear, watching you get fucked is the second hottest thing to seeing those lips wrapped around me."

"You should see what it looks like to have her tight little cunt wrapped around your cock; it's fucking obscene," Philip growled, his fingers gripping my waist and causing me to push my ass back against him as the two of them railed into me and turned me into a complete mess.

I had no idea why I found it so hot that they were talking like I wasn't here, but fuck, I loved it.

"Well, fucking come and I will." Chait pulled out of my throat, and I made a sound of protest as he lifted my chin up and bent down to sear my lips in a deep kiss. "I love you so goddamn much."

Before I could respond, he was kissing me again, and I was crying against his mouth as Philip continued to push deeper. I felt a phantom spark of magic circle my clit, causing me to tremble, wanting to give in while also pushing away, feeling like it was all too much. An overload of sensation.

"It's too much." My gasp was accented with a following moan.

"No." Philip's voice was dangerous as he gripped my hair. "You are going to take us both, Maize. Understand me? You're going to be a good girl and spread those fucking legs and take both of us until you have our cum spilling out of you."

That about did it. I came hard as Philip let out a feral sound, my orgasm drawing out his as he did exactly what he fucking said, slamming home inside of me and filling me completely with his cum. When he pulled out, I didn't have a chance to recover before Chait was tugging me forward.

"My turn." Chait's rough tone had my body snapping right back into a state of need as he positioned me easily to use as he wanted. I found the darkness of the concept so appealing that my legs opened and my back arched to accommodate him between my frame. When I looked up, I found Philip staring into my goddamn soul.

"Chait," I whimpered as he began sliding into me, stretching me in a completely different and fucking amazing way. Philip watched with a

wicked smile, his fingers intertwined with mine and stretching my arms to the side as if holding me down…which he totally was. When Chait was completely lodged inside of me, I looked down at the tattooed man, who looked to be in pain and pleasure at the same time.

“Shit,” Chait groaned. “You feel so fucking good.”

“The best,” Philip agreed and kissed me from upside down before issuing another demand. “Now fuck her hard enough that she knows exactly who she’s in bed with.”

I didn’t need him to say that he was trying to remove the dream of Oberon I’d been having—that much was goddamn clear.

I couldn’t even take a moment to process what he was saying, and it didn’t matter, because Chait’s speed and endurance were something else. Where Philip had taken me hard and deep, Chait was railing into me and stroking himself off, causing my desire to grow because he was never inside of me for long enough.

I even tried to tighten my legs around him to hold him there, but phantom hands yanked my legs apart, making my magic nearly break out, knowing that these men were mine and that we wanted all of them.

Time began to feel hazy as my moans were caught by Philip, his wicked dirty talk causing everything inside of me to explode in flames as Chait continued to create a permanent mold of his cock in my pussy.

I was buzzing with an energy that felt like an electric charge and no matter how hard I tried to come, the bastard seemed to be able to hold me right on the edge, never allowing me to have what I needed.

“Please,” I whimpered. “Please let me come.”

Chait groaned. “Not until I come, Maize. I want to feel your pussy tightening around me as I spill all of myself into this tight little cunt.”

His words and the idea of him coming inside of me completely set me off. I let out a scream and exploded around him, my magic causing the bed to rattle as Chait groaned, almost sounding pained. I could feel him spilling inside of me as his cock flexed, and Philip’s teeth bit down onto my neck before he soothed it with kisses, the explosive feeling throughout me leaving me almost feeling transcendent.

“Holy fuck.” My eyes closed as Philip chuckled against my ear.

“That was a fucking religious experience, damn right,” Philip mused.

Chait’s head buried against my chest was heavy, and his words had my lips turning up into a smile. “Oh man, Valerio is totally pissed, and so is

Cannon.”

“I don’t feel bad,” I murmured.

“I’m just glad that Charm and Zed took the boys out for an early breakfast,” Philip admitted.

I froze, my eyes widening as the fact that we had them living in our house flooded back. “Shit,” I mumbled. “We need to be more careful with that.”

“Good thing we have a lot of people to distract them.” Chait smirked.

Shaking my head, I let out a sigh of happiness and closed my eyes. I felt peace for all of ten seconds before I remembered my dream.

Opening my eyes, panic gripped me again. “Oberon is definitely a problem.”

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CHAPTER 13

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MAIZE

My back hit the training mat as a laugh broke from my lips, followed by a groan. Valerio looked way too amused as he crouched down next to me and tilted his head.

"Now, baby, I know you can do better than that," he chided.

"I'm going to kill you," I groaned. "This is unfair. I literally completely rely on my magic while fighting. You aren't even giving me a bow and arrow. How the hell am I supposed to beat you?"

Not that my magic would let me, because she was insanely upset I was trying to hurt my mate…but that wasn't the point!

Valerio's eyes filled with mirth. "I sort of love seeing you this way."

I took his outstretched hand. "What, frustrated and out of breath?"

"Precisely." He winked and I rolled my eyes, stepping out of reach to start again. I could feel eyes on us, and it didn't surprise me all that much, because we were literally in the Red Masques Academy training room in the middle of the day. I wouldn't lie and say I was completely comfortable with it though.

The looks didn't feel threatening, they just made me uncomfortable, as most attention did. I tried to ignore it, knowing that my men were working to keep their students as focused as possible.

I hadn't even planned on coming here today, but Brielle had canceled because her sisters had had a rough day at school and came home early. Of course I'd been disappointed, but I'd also understood completely. After all, they weren't the only ones attempting to fit in at the Academy.

My gaze moved over to where Zed and Chait were working with my brothers. I nearly shook my head, not knowing how to handle that tidbit of

knowledge. Obviously they weren't Mario's children, so were they my half brothers? I suppose it didn't matter, but it really did feel like I was missing something.

Apparently I was distracted, because Valerio was suddenly in my space, his fingers sliding over my jaw while tilting my head to study my expression.

"What's wrong?"

"Just a lot at once," I admitted. "I'm tired. Bone tired, truth be told."

I could see surprise cross his expression, which had me realizing, once again, how little I expressed my feelings. I needed to be better about that. I wasn't doing it on purpose; I just wasn't used to people asking or caring, truth be told.

"Why don't we head back?" Valerio's voice had my toes curling as I studied his expression. I honestly wasn't positive if it was a good idea for us to be alone right now. I had a feeling what would happen, and my body was a bit exhausted from this morning. I mean, it had been fucking amazing, but I was tired.

That dream crept up again in my consciousness, but I tried to ignore it. We'd already had that conversation, and I had zero doubt we would be revisiting it.

"I can't be that far away from the others comfortably." I sighed, knowing if it was the majority of them, it would be difficult. I smirked slightly as I admitted, "Plus, I don't trust myself alone with you."

Valerio's eyes heated. "Afraid of what I'll do?"

A shiver trailed over my skin. "Afraid of the punishment I'll receive with how pissy you were being earlier."

And he had been. So damn grumpy.

"Punishment?" His smile grew. "Well, that's a fucking fantastic idea—"

"You have an audience!" Cannon called in passing, making Valerio chuckle. My cheeks stained pink as I noticed some of the older kids watching us with fascination.

They probably wondered why Valerio wasn't killing me or something. I mean, apparently, the guy was pretty scary. I didn't see it, but then again, I wanted to screw him seven ways till Sunday, so that was my own problem.

"Teacup." Maddox's voice was frustrated as I ignored his muttered curse, finding it amusing now that he caught elements of my thoughts.

What? I could totally use that to my advantage.

“Come on, let’s go by the boys.” Valerio’s fingers intertwined with mine as we walked towards them, their conversation with Chait and Zed seemingly intense.

Something caught my eye in the hallway, and I turned my head, narrowing my eyes at where I thought I’d just spotted a large, dark-haired man. I looked around, realizing all my men were present, and most of the recruits weren’t nearly as big as my mates. Something about the person had left me with a weird feeling.

“Give me a minute,” I mumbled, letting go of Valerio’s hand as I walked towards the hallway. I knew he wouldn’t give me much space, but as I pushed through the doors, I found the long hallway completely empty. The only exit was at the very far end, which meant that I’d just imagined it… Unless they somehow portalled in that small amount of time.

Odd.

I inhaled, not sensing any weird magic but feeling increasingly anxious.

A piece of paper on the floor caught my attention, ripped and discarded, crumbled up. I wouldn’t have normally noticed it, but because it was the only thing in the otherwise spotless hallway, it had my attention. I moved towards it and crouched down to grab it.

My wrist was caught by Charm, who appeared next to me and used his boot to shift the paper out of reach, just offering me a small head shake.

“I don’t like the magic coming off that shit,” he explained softly before walking towards it himself.

“Charm,” I warned as the bastard picked it up and unfurled it. I tried to not get pissed, knowing he was being protective, but why the hell did he get to put himself in danger? I wasn’t cool with that.

His dandelion eyes ran over it as he looked up at me, concern clouding his gaze. I walked over to him, and instantly the sloppy cursive made my skin break out in chills.

Tomorrow he returns.

Now, if that wasn't eerie, vague, and causing all the warning bells in my head to sound off, I'm not sure what would. I exhaled, and Valerio appeared as Charm barked his name. He took the piece of paper and looked over it, his jaw clicking as he strode away, leaving me with my demon.

I wasn't fully positive how I expected Charm to react to the situation, but when I turned back towards him, I had barely blinked before I was caged against the wall of the hallway, my pulse hitching. His eyes were black—literally completely black—and his entire body was tense and when he pressed against me. I could feel how hard he was, his demonic magic shifting under the surface and becoming far more dominant than Charm's normal personality. I inhaled sharply as black smoke began to wrap around me, his forehead pressing to mine as he seemed to be on the precipice of something.

Something told me that I needed to be careful right now, and I wasn't one hundred percent positive how I should go about walking him back from this. Mostly because I couldn't ask what was wrong without possibly reminding him of it.

"Charm…" I hesitated.

"Give me a minute, birdy." His voice was rough as he shook his head, clearly struggling with something. A growl came out of his throat as I felt a familiar presence enter the hallway.

"I wouldn't," I offered to Zed as he muttered a curse and closed the doors, affording us privacy. I didn't think Charm was a danger to me, even this worked up, and it appeared I was correct since none of them seemed very concerned.

"I can't handle you constantly being in danger," Charm admitted, his voice rough. "I am trying so hard to keep it together, Maize, but the idea of someone, anyone, taking you from us is pushing me to that point. I feel like we are always a second away from losing you."

"I'm not going anywhere," I soothed, my fingers trailing up his neck to his jaw as he let out a low, throaty sound that caused my skin to prickle with goosebumps.

"You aren't," he confirmed softly, pulling back to stare at my lips. I let my head fall back, wanting him to kiss me. So much so, I went up on my toes. He immediately had me wedged against the wall once again, his lips pressing to mine in what I expected to be a hard, demanding kiss.

Instead it was almost unbearably sweet, and my skin flushed as I curled further against him, loving the way he seemed to coax the kiss out of me, every inch of my skin turning into an inferno as his magic surrounded me tightly. I didn't bother stopping the moan that came out of my throat as his hand brushed up my waist and cupped my breast, his thumb rubbing over my hard nipple that pressed against my sports bra. Like a goddamn light switch, everything inside of me lit up, my skin brightening in an iridescent blue hue and my wings popping out of my back.

Instead of being afraid of it, though, I embraced it, and when Charm pulled back to look at me, his voice was uneven. "Fuck, birdy, you are so beautiful."

My wings fluttered, and I felt my breath catch as his large fingers trailed over them, the sensation practically sending an electric shock straight to my pussy. I whimpered as a devilish smirk came on his lips, clearly reading my desire that I wanted more of that, more from him. When his lips pressed back to mine, he caught my moans as he continued to tease my wings, causing my center to clench and my head to grow dizzy.

It was like his magic had the ability to completely amp up my body, it was so ridiculously hot. My lips trailed down his jaw as I rubbed my nose against his throat, trying to stop myself from feeding from him. I wanted to though. I wanted to taste his blood, and not just because I was saving him.

"Bite me, birdy." His voice was rough. "I would fucking love that."

It was all the permission I needed. I surged forward, latching onto his neck. His breathing was rough as his hands gripped my waist and I drew blood from him, my fingers tightening in his hair to hold his neck to me.

When he picked me up under my thighs, I moaned at the sensation of his hard length against me and unabashedly rubbed against him. His grip on me was tight enough that when I pulled away from drinking his blood and his lips smashed to mine, I felt everything near that edge. I was going to fucking come from rubbing against him.

This should have been embarrassing.

Instead, I lit up like a firework when he bit down on my lip, hard enough it hurt, and sent my body into a sprint. He groaned my name in response to me climaxing as he burned his lips against my throat and sucked hard. Hard enough that I knew it would leave a mark, giving me a sense of satisfaction at his possessive nature. My breathing was rough as I pulled back and offered him a smile.

Charm's eyes were bright and back to normal as he offered me a smile I so rarely saw. I let out a happy sound as his fingers intertwined with mine and just our breathing filled the space.

When he pulled back, his smile was cocky. "So your wings are sensitive?"

"Clearly." I blushed as he let me down and kissed me hard again.

"That was hot as hell, birdy. Feel free to use me to get off any fucking time you want."

I nearly whimpered at how sexy he was being. I could deal with asshole Charm, but this side of him was just dangerous.

A knock on the hallway door had us both looking over to find an amused Philip standing there, the space behind him completely cleared out. "You two done?"

"Yes," I said at the same time Charm grumbled, "No, fuck off."

"We had to cancel practice and everything." Philip tried to sound like he was scolding us, but instead he seemed beyond amused. "Now you are going to have to deal with a cranky Valerio—"

"When is he not cranky?" I flashed a smile.

As we made our way from the training center and down towards the main foyer, I was happy to find my mates waiting around and hanging with my brothers. Valerio offered me a heated look as Charm and I walked towards where he stood talking to the boys. My voice was quiet as I looked up at Charm, feeling a bit insecure.

"I don't know the first thing about raising kids."

"Cannon raised his brother and the kid has turned out alright," he mused quietly before tightening his fingers with mine. "I'm sure we will figure it out."

I agreed, but I was still nervous, and as we neared the boys, all of them looked over with interest. I offered a smile, Harland the only one to offer a tentative smile back. Lyric gave a polite head nod, and Relic continued to stare at me with wide eyes, as if I was about to do something fascinating… which honestly made me feel a bit on edge. Then there was Cairo.

I didn't know what to make of the kid, exactly, but not in a bad way. He just left me feeling a bit confused. Honestly, he sort of reminded me of my half-brother Bandit. A loose similarity, though, because Cairo was just a kid and Bandit was a sociopathic time mage obsessed with his wife. But he had

a similar energy to him, and it made me wonder what this kid would be like as he grew older.

I couldn't imagine being the true embodiment of death. If anyone understood what it was like to be given powers that affected who you were as a person, it was me. Which of course was why I was raising them. I was starting to think this forest lady was onto something.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Charm pulled me from my thoughts as he directed his question towards Valerio, the two of them leaving me with the boys. I sat down across from them on a bench, assessing them as they looked back at me with interest. I tilted my head as they did the same and I fought the urge to smile at that.

"So, you're my brothers," I noted quietly.

"Yes," Cairo nodded. "We didn't know until Mom said we would be leaving."

My heart hurt at the sadness that he tried to mask. I exhaled slowly before asking, "What's this about you guys being in danger? Do we need to actively worry?"

"We aren't in danger yet," Relic explained, adjusting himself so he was sitting forward with an eagerness like he'd been waiting to talk to someone about it. "We will be though. Once we come into power, they will try to hunt us. But we have to be here in the Horde to help."

"Who will try to hunt you?" I demanded softly.

"The angels," Lyric explained. "We are going to change everything with the help of *heredis auguratricis*."

I blinked as the term spilled out of his mouth so easily, as if he'd been saying it forever. I had a feeling this story had been repeated to them often.

I wasn't positive how I felt about that, putting all that pressure on such young kids.

"Who is that?"

Harland spoke up. "Mommy didn't say. The realms are going to be in trouble soon. Big trouble. But later, when we're older, there is going to be a war like nothing anyone has ever seen. The *heredis auguratricis* will help us end the war. There is a prophecy about it."

"How? And what war?" I demanded.

"The war of the realms," Lyric explained seriously. "Soon the realms will band together to defeat an evil, but then years will pass and there will

be a great war. If we aren't alive, we won't be able to stop it. Won't be able to find the *heredis auguratricis* for help."

"And how will the *heredis auguratricis* help?"

All four boys stared at me before saying, in honestly a creepy, unified effect, "By sacrificing their life."

Shit.

"I hate the idea of him being able to touch you at all, even through a dream," Zed admitted quietly against my ear as he stood behind me, caging me against the back railing of the house. We were currently looking out over the thick forest as the other men showed the boys through the unknown landscape around our home.

I had been confused at first why they were doing that, but Cannon explained that if they ended up going out to play or explore, he wanted them to be able to find their way back home. It was a sweet notion, and actually really solid reasoning. It also felt good knowing that they would have the ability to explore a space freely.

Maybe if I'd had that as a child, I wouldn't have felt nearly as locked up in my own damn home growing up.

Plus, I was serious about the Horde not being safe, no matter how powerful they were. I mean, the place contained a location called the 'nightmare forest'—I didn't care how you spun it, that shit was creepy.

Their post-dinner exploring also gave me time to think about the boys' words. They'd stayed with me, even after training when we went home to have dinner. I had no idea what to make of them, and honestly, I would have called them nonsense if it wasn't for the very heavy sense of maturity and seriousness that coated their words.

"I just don't understand what he wants from me," I murmured, shaking my head as I watched a snow-white owl circle overhead as the evening grew darker.

"He doesn't want anything from you," Zed insisted quietly. "He wants *you*. There is a big difference."

The worst part was that he seemed exactly on the nose. Oberon wanted me, and I just didn't understand why.

I felt a small strain of panic as I lost track of Lyric for a minute, only to see him pop up next to Charm a second later. I was actively trying to ignore the anxiety I felt about them being outside in the first place. Zagan and Oberon weren't after *them*. I knew that rationally, but it didn't make me feel completely better. I didn't put it past Zagan to use people I cared about against me, even children.

"He doesn't get me." I turned into Zed and ran my fingers up his jaw. The man still looked tired, but a far cry from before. Leaning forward, he pressed his forehead to mine, and I let out a small sound of contentment, happy to be wrapped up in him.

Don't get me wrong, I loved all aspects of having these men as my mates—even the harder parts, where we didn't see eye to eye—but this? This contentment and level of affection I could feel bone deep? It was completely something else, and it may have been one of my favorite parts. I could no longer deny how much they cared for me and it removed a lot of the insecurity that stemmed from my past.

"Damn right he doesn't," Zed bit out as I smiled at his conviction. I was so caught up in him that I jolted when I heard someone knock on the door at the front of the house. It was a faint knock, but almost instantly I could feel the familiar magic that awaited outside the doorway. Not just one signature, either.

Walking inside, I walked towards the kitchen as Zed grabbed the door, surprise echoing through our bond as Commander Edwin and Vegas walked in, greeting him. I smiled at how Vegas was practically bouncing between him and my half-brother Bandit, who followed them up.

Speak of the devil. I'd just been thinking about the bastard earlier.

"Maize!" Vegas smiled happily as she grabbed a chair at the kitchen island and fixed me with a look. I had a feeling why she was here, but I was curious what Edwin and Zed were talking about as well. By now the news had made it to them about the boys, especially because they had been at practice. Bandit joined Vegas, and after offering me a head nod, kept his gaze focused on her.

"Evening walk?" I asked knowingly.

"No." Vegas shook her head. "No, I heard that you have brothers…more brothers—sorry, Bandit." She squeezed his arm as if the notion of him not being considered my real half-brother would offend him. I could guarantee you that it didn't.

“Apparently,” I confirmed.

Edwin joined us, and I decided to explain fully what had happened, knowing that the Commander was probably analyzing every word. I tried to downplay their magic just a small amount, feeling protective over the young boys. I mean, I knew they were probably concerned about what four new extremely powerful students from the Demonic realm would bring to the Horde, so I understood why they would be worried. But I believed we could help them, so I planned on doing my best to protect them.

When I was done, Vegas was staring at me with fascination, and Edwin looked thoughtful. I didn’t meet Bandit’s gaze because I had absolutely no doubt he could probably see something about the boys in the future, or at least now had gone looking for it since I’d added in the possible danger they were in.

I couldn’t imagine what it was like to be a time mage.

“That’s sort of crazy,” Vegas mumbled. “I wonder what type of danger.”

Yeah, I hadn’t included the prophecy part. I wasn’t sure why, but something told me that wasn’t a good idea, and considering I hadn’t confirmed it from their mother, I felt like that was the responsible thing to do. Plus, I didn’t want the boys to be viewed as any more different than they already were because of their lethal magic. They deserved a normal childhood, to whatever extent we could provide.

“Well, we can make sure to accommodate them.” Edwin frowned. “Maize, I know this is a lot at once—do you want to have them here or to be placed with another—”

“They stay here,” I said automatically, not even considering an alternative. Sure, it was an adjustment, but I couldn’t justify just handing them off to people they didn’t know. I didn’t want them in danger, and I’d been given this responsibility and accepted it. I didn’t make a habit out of breaking my word.

Before they could argue, another knock on the door had Vegas frowning as she turned towards the entrance. Edwin appeared by the door in a flash, opening it to reveal two more of Vegas’s husbands, Kodiak and Blue. I eyed the first, noticing that he had a baby carrier on…with a baby in it. I felt surprise hit me again, as if realizing for the first time that she had a kid, which was insane. Why was it so hard to remember that Vegas literally had a baby only last year? Probably because it looked like it’d barely fazed her.

Immediately, concern crossed her face. “What’s wrong?”

“Just acting up.” Blue offered a smile before giving a nod in greeting to both Zed and me. “We told her we were going to see Mommy and she seemed far happier.”

“I bet she was,” Vegas cooed as she took the most angelic little girl from her husband and pushed her snow hood down from her silver head of curls. I knew it was cold out, but the girl looked like a little marshmallow with how bundled up she was. Immediately upon seeing her mom, she broke into a massive smile.

Honestly, I was almost positive the girl was only ten or eleven months at most, but the way she was looking around, first at her mom and then everyone else, made me feel like she was older. Her bright, spring-green eyes focused on me as her smile grew, and her little gloved hand reached out to touch me.

“Maize, have you met Zariyah? Or Zari, if you prefer.” Vegas preened and turned the baby towards me. I leaned forward on the counter as she tried to reach for me, but I kept purposefully out of distance.

“I haven’t officially.” I smiled softly. “She’s gorgeous.”

“Like her mom,” Kodiak grunted as Vegas tossed him a smile.

I moved back as Zariyah reached out for me, a little too close for comfort, Vegas offering me an understanding smile. I didn’t need to be going and poisoning babies by accident. *Maker*. I knew I would never actually do that, but it was a bit of a fear of mine. I think I would always fear my lack of control, and even with my mates’ support, the concept of hurting someone that was an innocent bystander to my magic was fucking terrifying.

Suddenly, the back door opened as Relic’s voice filled the space, seemingly in a good mood as he explained something about the rock he took from outside, to Charm. Almost immediately my demon came to a stop, offering a surprised expression at our surprise visitors before offering a nod of greeting. I looked back down at Relic but found him completely frozen in place, staring at the group of them with large eyes.

Strangers. I should have thought about how much strangers would freak them out. Shit. I shouldn’t have had new people over yet. This was supposed to be their safe place…

Then again, they had just shown up, so I hadn’t really decided anything.

“Relic?” I called out.

He looked at me, but then went back to Vegas. What was going on with him? I walked over and crouched down, his hand tightening on my shirt. Oddly enough, I didn't worry about him accidentally getting hurt by my magic. I had a feeling that was impossible, despite not knowing the extent of his power.

"Who is that?" he asked softly, almost in a whisper.

"Vegas?" I pointed to her.

He shook his head and pointed at the baby. "Who is that?"

Oh.

"That's Vegas's daughter, Zariyah," I explained softly.

He frowned, the sudden tears welling in his eyes throwing me for a complete loop. I nearly fell back as Relic put his arms around me and began sobbing, my hand pressing to his back as everyone stared at him in bewilderment. Well, except for Bandit. Bandit's expression stood out because it was completely serious and hyperfocused on Relic. Instantly I felt extremely protective, and I tried to keep my magic close so I didn't hurt anyone by accident. I tried to pull back physically, even from Relic, but ended up staying there since he wouldn't let me go.

When the back door opened again, I turned to watch the other boys walk in, immediately looking panicked about their brother.

"What's wrong?" Cairo demanded as Relic pushed away from me. He wiped his tears away, shaking his head and looking down at the floor.

"Nothing."

"Liar," Harland insisted, rounding the space.

At that moment, Zariyah let out a small cry that echoed through the room and caused all four boys to tense. I swallowed as Relic's bottom lip trembled, and Harland looked up, staring wide-eyed at the baby. Cairo was frozen next to me, and Lyric's entire body was rigid.

"What is wrong?" I demanded of them.

Lyric looked at me and whispered in my ear so softly I could guarantee you that only I could hear. "*Heredis auguratricis* means 'Heir of the Sorceress' in Latin."

Oh no.

"What the hell is going on?" Kodiak asked gruffly.

"Nothing," I said evenly and seriously, trying not to show my obvious surprise at his words. "They are just tired, lots going on in the past twenty-four hours. Maybe we can do a meet and greet later?"

“Of course.” Vegas nodded, holding her daughter close.

I wasn’t even paying attention to our goodbye. Instead I stood with the boys, not knowing how to handle their reaction. How to handle the fact that the boys were insinuating that Vegas’s daughter was someone important in the future of the realms. Someone more than important. Someone essential. Someone who would sacrifice their life to save this realm.

Fuck. How the hell did I tell Vegas that?

“Baby.” Valerio was suddenly crouched in front of me, much like earlier, but this time there was such a different tone to it. I took his hand as he pulled me against him, and I blew out a slow breath, knowing I needed to explain what was going on. The other guys were helping calm the boys down as they brought them to their room.

“Okay, I am about to say something crazy, but I think we need to have a family meeting for it once the boys go to bed,” I murmured.

Valerio nodded as I tried to think through how the hell I would explain it when I didn’t even understand it myself. Hopefully we could figure something out, because this situation was majorly messed up.

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CHAPTER 14

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CANNON

"The boys haven't come into their power, so they could be confused." My voice was soft and hesitant as I tried to really process what Maize was saying and what it could mean. I didn't see these boys as the type to say shit they didn't authentically believe, but they were also barely six years old…not even…so that made a sure difference.

Maybe they were confused. I hoped they were, because I already felt protective over them, and coming at Commander Edwin with 'Hey, so Maize's brothers say your daughter plays a fundamental role in the future of the realm by sacrificing her life' was exactly the type of thing that would get me killed. Not only me, but also them, and I was absolutely not okay with that shit. They were kids; they couldn't control what their magic was telling them, even if it was an insane prophecy.

"Either way, we should wait to say anything. They are so young, it could be nothing," Valerio murmured before looking at Maize. "Let's try to talk to their mom and see if we can get more information on this prophecy."

"I feel like saying anything is going to get our throats ripped out," Chait grunted.

"I happen to like my throat," Zed said, placing his hands over it protectively.

I tried to not laugh at that because this was so damn serious, but they weren't joking. Implying anything but perfect health in regards to Edwin's family, especially his daughter, was fucking dangerous. I mean, I didn't blame them… If we had a kid—hell, if anyone even threatened these boys—I would probably lose it.

I wasn’t positive how it had happened, but I already considered them part of my pack. Something I hadn’t been expecting but made me feel a fierce sense of protectiveness. Despite them clearly being powerful, I had a feeling these boys already felt lost in the world, and at only six years old, that was a dangerous place to be.

“We shouldn’t say shit right now until they are old enough to explain fully,” Maddox agreed, wrapping his arm around Maize’s waist. “Plus, I don’t want teacup taking the brunt of this.”

Which she probably would.

“I don’t want anyone in danger,” she mumbled and deflated. “You guys really think we should ignore it for now?”

“Just until we get more confirmation,” Charm explained. She nodded, making me relax slightly.

“Maize, you need sleep,” I commanded quietly, standing up. She shook her head, looking as if she was about to protest. Which was why I easily picked her up, her huff of resignation as she went limp like a rag doll in my arms making me smile.

Yeah, she was exhausted.

By the time we reached upstairs, she was passed out in my arms while clinging to me. I kissed her forehead and laid her down on the bed before crawling into bed with her. My body was tired as I wrapped my arm around her and brushed my lips against my mating mark on her pale skin.

Despite the circumstances that led to it, I was beyond pleased that I’d gotten to claim Maize. I was starting to understand why Kodiak was such an asshole when I was around Vegas.

I had forced myself to stay outside when I’d seen he was there at the house, because the idea of another wolf in her space made me absolutely fucking furious. I needed to be more rational. I was better than this. I’d made sure my brother was better than this…or at least tried. But fuck, having a mate called up all those damn instincts, urging me to attack anyone I considered a threat to her.

I had to admit, though, this entire situation really brought me back to the moments with my brother when we were both much younger and I’d been doing my best to raise him by myself. I ran a hand over my face, remembering one particularly hard conversation...

“Cannon?” Jude’s voice pulled me out of my trance. I’d been staring out a window at the snow accumulating while stirring a pot of stew I’d thrown together. Not for the first time, I was thankful that we’d been offered a small cabin here on the Academy grounds. If it wasn’t for that, we’d be out there in the fucking snow.

It was times like this that I wondered if I should have taken Valerio up on the offer to move into the joint dorms with the team, or even the house. At least then we would have some company that would possibly extinguish the sadness in my brother’s voice. No matter how close we were, there was always a sense of loneliness that accompanied our situation. I just was trying to hold off on moving in with others until he was a bit older.

There was no need to expose him to the Academy at only six years old. Hell, sometimes I didn’t even think I should be here at sixteen. I wasn’t against anything that was taught, but it was an aggressive space, and aggression at a young age for wolf shifters tended to do more harm than good.

“What’s up, bud?” I turned to find him staring down at a picture he was drawing.

“Ms. Birch asked us to draw a picture of our family. Everyone else had a mommy and daddy. Why don’t we have that?”

What the hell did I say to that? I knew he hadn’t fully processed our dad’s death yet. I mean, how could he? It had happened when he’d been four. He just knew he didn’t have one, unlike a lot of the other kids. To him it was just us two and then Mrs. Lena, who stopped by to check in on us as a favor to my dad.

When my mom left us shortly after Jude’s birth, Mrs. Lena stepped in to help take care of us. Her own husband had been part of the military and died in battle, their kids fully grown, so she said she enjoyed spending time with us. Now that I was at the Academy and living here with my brother, I didn’t see her except for dropping Jude off at her house each morning so he could go to school with other kids his age.

I would admit that I missed her, but I also knew I couldn’t rely on anyone anymore, even if they were nice old ladies who had always been there for us.

“Because family isn’t about a mom, dad, or anything like that,” I spoke honestly. “It’s about the people who stick by you.”

Jude's eyes welled with tears. "Why don't more people stick by us? Is there something wrong with us?"

I swallowed down my own emotions, because I'd asked myself that same damn question so many times before, it was unreal.

"Nah." I shook my head, forcing out something that would make him feel better. "It's not about how many, it's about the type of people. Quality over quantity." Or something like that.

"Are you sure?" he whispered.

"Positive." But I wasn't at all.

I still wasn't completely positive. I mean, what made one person worthy of having so many loved ones while others were given so few? Some days I truly didn't think I needed more than my brother and me. We'd even lost Mrs. Lena two years ago, and while that hurt, a part of my subconscious wasn't fully surprised. We lost everyone we were close to… which was why Maize being taken scared the hell out of me.

Other times, I just considered myself lucky to have been given a team. I viewed them as pack and brothers, and I hoped they felt the same, but I wouldn't lie—insecurity rode me hard. My own mother, the woman who had given life to us, had deemed us as unfit for love, and if that wasn't enough to fuck with someone's self-esteem, I had no idea what was. Of course, as I'd grown older, I'd started to become more comfortable with my past despite the scars it had left.

I had abandonment issues, and Maize somehow brought them to the front. She didn't mean to, of course, but when she ran and then when she was taken, both had completely wrecked me. The idea of her just disappearing as if she had never existed, or the idea of my own mate rejecting me, left me with dread filling my stomach.

But then I truly considered who Maize was as a person, and the truth of that trumped it. My gaze ran across her exhausted expression as I wrapped myself tighter around her, feeling far more possessive than usual tonight.

I knew I was supposed to share, but fuck, I didn't want to right now. It was enough they could sleep in her bed tonight; I wanted her to myself just for a few hours. It was a natural urge. Especially since the two of us hadn't been able to spend all our time together after mating.

Something that was complete bullshit, if you asked me. Honestly, between the mark and my own mating compulsions, I felt a small sting of mate withdrawal. The only thing trumping that was the fact that I knew there was a threat to Maize, but once we eliminated that, I was going to convince her to take a trip with me. Maybe somewhere in the Light Fae realm or something like that. Somewhere I could spend a few days exploring every inch of her body.

“Cannon?” Maize’s voice brought me out of my thoughts as I found her eyes bright and alert, making me wonder just how long had passed.

“You should be sleeping.” I kissed her lightly as she ran her fingers through my hair and let out a small, content sound that had my cock hardening. Honestly, everything about the woman, down to her satisfaction over the little things, was enough to make me happy.

“I can tell you’re tense; what’s going on?” she murmured.

“Honestly?” I asked her quietly.

She nodded, her expression serious despite me wanting to make the answer to the question somewhat joking.

“I was just thinking about these boys and how hard it had to be having a massive change in their life at such a young age. I was ten when my mom left us and fourteen when my dad died. But knowing your parents are alive but having to go live with strangers? That has to be such a weird feeling.” I shook my head. “I guess all of this shit is just bringing my own feelings to the forefront.”

Maize nodded, looking over my chest before looking back up at me. “I can’t believe your mom just left. That makes me so angry.”

Running my fingers through her hair, I let out a tired sigh. “As much as it fucking hurt, I’m glad that she did. At least Jude and I just have abandonment issues instead of being raised by a woman who would probably have made it all too clear how much she didn’t want to be around us.”

“I’m sorry,” she whispered softly, looking thoughtful. “I know it’s in the past, but I have to imagine me leaving didn’t feel very good.”

“It didn’t, but I also know you’re nothing like her,” I explained and then smiled. “You didn’t leave because you were bored of us, you left because you didn’t feel like you deserved mates, which is absolute bullshit.”

“Yeah?” she asked softly. “You think I deserve you guys? Even with all the problems I seem to be attracting?”

“I think you deserve whatever you want.” I tilted her jaw back. “Plus, dealing with your so-called problems makes me feel like I am useful to my mate, so yes, of course you deserve men who are going to love and cherish you to the best of our abilities.”

Maize blushed at my intense comment, her tongue darting out to lick her lips before she asked, “I deserve whatever I want?”

Suddenly she rolled us so that she was on top of me, vivid imagery of us fucking in that damn military post rolling through my mind as I let out a low, dangerous sound from the back of my throat.

“Anything,” I agreed, my fingers running over her waist and tightening on her ass. Fuck, did she have a fantastic body.

“What if I wanted to meet your wolf?” she asked quietly.

“My wolf wants to meet you, fully.” I felt my ears heat as I admitted to such a silly, almost childish urge. I mean, shit, he was my animal counterpart, and he was pushing to come out like he wanted to preen like a peacock.

Immediately she was up looking excited, her lips pressed into a bright smile. “Well, let me meet him. Come on, please? You said I deserved what I want…and that’s what I want.”

I don’t think I’d expected her reaction, but looking around the room and noticing that Chait and Zed were both passed out in the large bed, I realized there was no reason not to.

“Downstairs.” I urged her up and out of bed as I intertwined our fingers and walked us down the steps.

Normally I would have taken her outside, but with everything that had happened, my wolf and I didn’t trust the woods at night. Not with our precious mate.

I sat her down on the armchair facing out towards a large, cleared space in the center of the room before pulling off my shirt over my head, her throat producing this cute surprised sound that had me feeling way too proud of how I looked. Then again, it was only natural to want to look good for my mate. Right?

“Like the view?” I mused.

“Yes, actually,” she mumbled.

I hesitated for a minute. “I don’t know how my wolf is going to act, exactly… Just don’t run. He may come up to you and sniff you and weird shit like that. If he does, please do not run.”

“Why?” Her lips tweaked up.

“Because he’ll chase you.”

Maize nodded, and I closed my eyes, easily surrendering to the change that had become second nature to me. My slight groan at the twinge of pain turned into a growl that escaped my throat as my vision dropped, my limbs changing. I was violently pushed to the back of my own head, leaving my wolf in charge.

“Shit,” Maize said, her eyes wide as my wolf and I looked her over from this point of view. Yet, while I was appreciating how fucking hot she looked in her comfortable clothes, my wolf was inspecting her for any signs of injury and looking for our mating mark. I had to give the woman credit—when we approached her, she didn’t look scared at all, staying perfectly still as we dragged our nose along her neck. I tried not to wince at the massive teeth I knew were all too close to her jugular.

I would never fucking hurt her.

Surprise processed through me in the realization that my wolf was so open to direct communication with me. It wasn’t that we didn’t get along, but it had just never been this vibrant and open before.

In fact, this was pretty rare. I only knew of one other shifter that openly could communicate to this extent, and that was Adyen, but he was a Royal Guard. I was powerful, but not that powerful… At least, I didn’t think so. I could also hear the true offense my wolf took to the concept that he’d ever hurt our mate.

Just concerned about how she would view it*, I told him.*

His annoyance was obvious, as if it was odd for me to be concerned about scaring our mate with how goddamn horrifying we were. Okay, maybe not horrifying, but vicious and intimidating was accurate for sure.

But then it didn’t matter, because her fingers were running through my fur as I let out a damn near purr at her touch. Fuck that felt amazing. Maize pressed her head against us as she let out a happy sigh, seemingly perfectly content with being cuddled up against us.

When she finally pulled back, her words were soft. “I’m glad I get to meet you.”

Fuck. My wolf was way too pleased she was addressing him so directly. A happy almost goddamn bark left my throat as Maize let out an honest-to-god giggle. Seriously, what were we going to do next, roll over and expose our belly to the woman?

This was out of hand.

“I wish we could go on a run.” She sighed a bit, nibbling her lip and looking outside. I groaned as my wolf nearly jumped up from where he’d sat next to her, the idea of running next to our mate, knowing she could probably keep up with us, making him fucking thrilled.

***No can do, buddy. Think about her safety**, I urged.*

She would be perfectly safe with us.

The worst part was that I didn’t disagree. Where I had some human flaws, like being distracted easily by my sexy mate, my wolf didn’t have the same weaknesses. Everything was about his pack and his mate. He would be able to keep watch on what was going on around us while enjoying the moment… Right?

“What do you think? Would it be safe? We’ve been out a lot lately,” she murmured.

I tried to push out to shift, but instead, my wolf slammed me to the back and nudged her gently towards the door. I didn’t know if this was a bad idea or not, but the concept of not giving my mate what she wanted also fucking gutted me. I settled down and decided to try to bargain with my wolf as we led her outside.

Keep within Academy grounds. I don’t want her in Zagan’s hands, and I know security here has been even harsher lately.

He seemed to agree, so I sat back, relaxing slightly as Maize walked ahead of us before turning around with a smile. I let out a growl as she winked and broke out into a sprint, moving away from me.

Hadn’t I told her not to run?

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CHAPTER 15

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MAIZE

I couldn’t help but laugh as I heard tree branches snapping behind me, loving the feel of the cold wind rushing over my skin and through my hair. It felt good to run. It felt good to push my magic to its full extent. I surrendered to the experience fully.

When I felt him gaining on me, I made a sharp turn and heard Cannon’s wolf bark out happily, seemingly thrilled with the game we were playing. I wouldn’t lie, I loved it so damn much. There was something exhilarating about using my magic and physical abilities this way. A level of freedom that I hadn’t felt since…well, I wasn’t positive I’d ever felt this uninhibited or alive before. If it hadn’t been my father’s hand controlling me, it had been what the OB expected from me, or even worse, waiting for what the guards had planned for me. This was the first time I’d ever felt this free, and it was all because of my mate.

I wasn’t positive how long we ran around the forested area behind our house, but eventually, I was legitimately out of breath and sweating despite the cool air. I collapsed with a huff on the snowy forest floor and smiled up at Cannon’s wolf as he appeared above me, tilting his head curiously as if not understanding what I was doing.

“Tired,” I admitted, running my fingers through his fur. “I could use some sleep.”

Nudging me with his nose, he urged me to stand. We began to walk back home, the dawn light barely filtering through and hitting the house. I felt no sense of danger, only the comfortability of Cannon’s wolf walking side by side with me. My hair was wild, and I felt like I’d finally used my muscles for the first time in a very, very long time… But I felt amazing.

“So, I know you can’t talk like this,” I stated quietly, his huff of frustration while nudging my side causing me to stumble and let out a small laugh. “I mean, not physically. I can still sort of understand you.”

It was true; his wolf was very expressive. He looked up at me, although ‘up’ was a hard statement to really use, because his wolf was fucking massive. Still, his expression was one of ‘Keep talking, I’m listening,’ so I did. I said what I’d been thinking for a bit.

“I think…I think I was so scared about having mates because I didn’t want to feel trapped, but I have never felt freer. Not just at this moment, either. I mean, this run has been amazing, but all of you have brought so much to my life. So much vibrancy. I know that probably sounds stupid, but you really have changed my life. I have never felt more at home than I do with you guys—Cannon!” My laugh caught in my throat as he suddenly shifted and knocked me on my ass with a hard kiss, his large frame caging me to the ground. The kiss left me breathless, and when I finally pulled away, I was staring up at the man’s burning white eyes that were filled with amusement and affection.

“I love you,” he whispered. “I love you so damn much.”

“I love you more,” I murmured and brought my hands up to his face, successfully managing to not get distracted by how hard he was right now.

“When I first met you,” he started, “I knew you were my mate, and it scared the hell out of me because I didn’t even realize that was a possibility. I didn’t know what that would mean for any of us and if my brothers would feel it. I was scared—”

“That it would cause problems?” I asked softly.

“Yeah.” He inhaled sharply. “Jude and I have been alone for most of my life, and I thought it was impossible to hope that I could not only have my brothers—my teammates—but my mate as well. It was why all of this has felt like a goddamn high-speed train.”

“I thought I would have to always be alone,” I murmured, “but then you said you would train me, not just contain me, and I knew you were different.”

“I would never want to cage you, Maize.” His voice was rough. “Even if my wolf sometimes thinks Valerio’s ideas are smart, we both love to see you free, like right now.”

“Valerio is goddamn insane,” I pointed out, amused.

“For you.” Valerio’s voice had me jolting as he rounded Cannon and scowled at him, tossing him a pair of sweatpants. “Why the hell are you naked and out in the snow? There are literal children on the Academy grounds.”

I blinked up innocently at the commander. “We were running together. I was just being cute and emotional, and now we have to stop because you’re being all grumpy.”

“Because you were gone from bed,” he argued as Cannon took the pants, seeming amused as I sat up, trying to not stare at the shifter. Valerio pulled me close, and I offered him a smile, feeling exhilarated.

He scowled. “Why can’t you be all emotional and cute with me?”

My lips pressed up as Cannon shook his head and started jogging back towards the house, the warm lights from inside peeking through the trees.

I tilted my head and smiled at Valerio. “And what would you like me to say? Do you want me to tell you that you made me realize that I can trust myself more and trust others? That you made me believe that I have more control over myself than I give myself credit for?

He blinked, his eyes sparkling with emotion. “Do you really feel that way?”

“I do,” I admitted softly.

Valerio’s kiss was full of emotion, searing my lips as he lifted me off the ground before placing me back down and turning sharply back towards the house, nearly storming away. I let out a small laugh, feeling a bit stunned. “What the hell was that?”

“I lied. No emotional cute stuff—it makes me want to fuck you.”

Oh. Well, honestly, that wasn’t a bad thing in my mind at all… I clearly needed to step up my ‘cute emotional’ game when it came to the crazy bastard. I followed happily, finding this entirely way too funny.

When I climbed up the back steps and found Chait watching Valerio storm inside the house, I couldn’t help but walk up and wrap my arms around him. After a moment, he handed me a cup of coffee and offered me a questioning look.

“I expressed my emotions to Valerio, got him all worked up.”

Chait pulled me into him and put his chin on top of my head as I looked through the window into the main part of the house. The others were waking up, and Maddox was making four sleepy boys breakfast. It was pretty adorable.

“We’re like a real family,” I murmured.

“We *are* a real family,” Chait promised. “This is real, Maize. Even if we aren’t like everyone else, this is one hundred percent real.”

He was absolutely right.

After a moment of absorbing his sentiment, he led me inside. Charm, who appeared out of nowhere, thrust a hoodie at me. I shrugged it on, his smile cute at how easily I accepted him taking care of me. I had no idea what it was about the man acting like a caregiver, but it was fucking adorable.

At least as cute as Zed, my sadistic blood mage, who walked up to me, tugging me away from Chait and burying his nose against my neck while picking me up. I let out a happy sigh, loving how affectionate he was despite it not being his nature.

These men, despite being the opposite of me in so many ways, were a perfect complement to the stark reality I had lived in for so damn long. It was a breath of fresh air, if we were being honest.

“Hey, grab some breakfast before you get ready. You need to eat,” Maddox insisted as my brothers watched me curiously, Relic making me smile as he pointed to the chair next to him. I sat down and took the offered eggs and bacon as I absorbed the sounds of my family talking around me, loving the fact that the boys seemed to be slowly opening up.

Sure, Cairo seemed a bit serious, but he was listening to Maddox and Relic talk about exploring more of the Horde. Lyric was reading a large book I’d seen Valerio hand him, and Harland was eating eagerly, humming to himself.

A buzz of happiness worked its way under my skin, only enhanced by Philip appearing next to me and stealing a piece of bacon. I swear, the man was such a paradox of different things from sweet, to kinky, to a million other different things that I loved.

“Maize,” Valerio began as he walked downstairs, “Get ready, baby. You’re coming to class with me today. I want you to help me plan a Dark Fae section.”

My eyes widened, and I saw Maddox watch my reaction curiously. Damnit, I knew they wanted me to teach, but I just wasn’t positive that I was ready for that.

I nibbled my lip and offered him a look. “You promise I am just helping you? I’m not ready to commit to teaching yet.”

“Pinky promise.” He winked.

I did not trust his pinky promises at fucking all.

“Fine,” I mumbled and stood up, messing with Cairo’s hair in the process and causing him to smile slightly. I hummed under my breath as I made my way upstairs, and I realized it was possibly the first time I’d hummed. Ever. It was a happy tune that I was completely making up, but it had me feeling like a new woman as I got into the shower.

Part of me hoped one of my mates would join, but I also knew that Valerio would probably kick their ass, because I could tell this classroom thing was important to him. I had to wonder why they were so insistent on me doing something like this.

As I scrubbed down completely, I was lost in my thoughts, enjoying the warm water. But my familiars, I realized, were oddly absent. Maybe absent wasn’t the right word…they were just quiet and under the surface like they’d been since the incident with Zagan. When I attempted to let them out, I felt a weird sensation break out over my skin, and then they both emerged, slowly and almost sluggishly. I turned off the water and grabbed a towel, kneeling down to where Lu and Sy were both staring at me.

“What’s wrong?” I demanded softly.

Panic began infiltrating my system, realizing that both of them looked pale in color and unhealthy…as if they were dying, or something equally as horrible. My fingers brushed over both of them as Sy crawled up my arm and Lu rested his head in my lap.

“Just tired,” Lu sighed. “So tired.”

“You are exerting a lot of energy, a lot more than normal,” Sy added. “Plus…there is something else. Something trying to affect you.”

No, I wasn’t. That was my first thought in reference to the energy I was using, but then something occurred to me.

“How long have you felt this way?”

“Since your dream,” Lu admitted.

Fuck.

“Okay, I need you guys to stop shielding me,” I instructed quietly. “Whatever you’re doing to protect me, let it go completely.”

“No,” Sy argued defensively. “I don’t know what it is that is trying to get to you, but it isn’t good.”

“Please?” I demanded softly as I stood up, distancing myself. “I can’t lose you two.” And I would if they didn’t stop. Both of them looked sickly.

Although, as they stayed away from me, I felt some of my magic drifting and reaching out to them, allowing them to saturate with a bit more color. Good. I needed them to be strong for me.

“Do it.”

The minute they pulled back, I tightened my grip on my towel and let out a groan, pain rocking through me in an unexpected whiplash. I barely registered that, though, because all of the sudden, I was being assaulted by insanely strong fae magic that felt so dark and ancient that it had bile rising in my throat.

I pushed back, but Oberon’s laughter in my head had everything spinning in a dizzyingly disastrous effect.

Fuck. This was bad.

I called out for help right as I was pulled under and collapsed.

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CHAPTER 16

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MADDOX

"What type of schooling did you have before this?" Chait asked Harland, the kid shoving down eggs and bacon like it was his goddamn job.

Although, he was a small kid, so he could use it for sure. I wasn't positive how he was supposed to be the embodiment of war, but I'd been lanky and awkward until about fourteen, so I couldn't completely rule it out.

"We don't need school," Lyric insisted, looking up from his book. "We know everything that we need to already."

"Doubtful," I mumbled.

Cairo's brow dipped. "What else is there to know?"

I could tell he was asking authentically, so I leaned on the counter and tried to explain. "Well, there is a lot, but one of them is how to fight. That's pretty damn important." It had nothing to do with school, but I wasn't wrong.

"But we can kill people. Why would we need to know how to fight?" Relic asked, adding quietly, "Cairo will always be able to kill them, even if we can't."

"What if you need to fight someone but you don't want them to die?" Chait questioned as I heard the shower turn on upstairs. Immediately I tried to ignore the idea of joining Maize, knowing that it would just result in absolutely nothing productive. Well, except for making her come, which I could easily focus on for days at a time. I didn't know nearly enough about her, and I had to constantly fight the urge to find her and strip her down completely.

I was lacking some serious control here.

“Fight but not kill?” Lyric seemed puzzled by the notion.

“Some people do that,” Harland confirmed.

“Or how about knowing how to count money,” I pointed out, trying to think of something not related to violence.

“Money?” Cairo looked completely confused.

“To buy sh—stuff,” Zed corrected himself, pouring another cup of coffee. I probably needed to watch my language as well—I knew I swore way too fucking much around these kids.

“Mommy always makes stuff,” Harland insisted.

“We need to go over a lot.” Chait nodded and looked towards Cannon, who was making his own omelet…well, three of them, actually. “Cannon, do you have any connections for Jude’s old schooling or tutoring? We can probably find someone here or at the castle, but I would rather it be someone we trust.”

I found myself almost smiling, wishing Maize was down here so she could see how odd this conversation was. Or…maybe not odd, per se, but just different. I had never considered what it would be like raising kids. I’d thought about getting Maize pregnant, but that was a completely different thread of thought.

No, right now, we were having to figure out something as a group that I hadn’t expected we’d have to do for years. I felt like we were doing a pretty decent job at it so far…I just hoped we could keep it up. I had no doubt we would be asking for help down the line.

Suddenly, I felt an odd shift around the magic of the house, and I walked towards the windows, looking out at the lightening sky. It was still very early, and the grounds were quiet, but instead of feeling peaceful as it had when we’d first woken up, there was a stillness to it that made me feel on edge. I narrowed my eyes where I thought I saw movement in the distance—

Pain exploded through my bond with Maize. I groaned, and my head vibrated with pressure, making me nearly fall to my knees. Throughout the room I heard echoed sounds of frustration and pain as I forced myself up. I could barely see, feeling like someone was continuously hitting me on the back of my head again and again, but I managed to make it up the stairs. I knew the others were doing similarly, but I was solely focused on finding Maize.

Something was very wrong.

As I sprinted to her room, I came to a stop in the bathroom doorway before diving towards her, lifting her off the ground. Immediately I noted where she must have hit herself on the counter on the way down, blood pooling around her. The towel wrapped around her frame was soaked in blood, and her familiar, the spider, sat on the counter as the snake moved back and forth nervously. I could feel their agitation, and honestly, they looked a bit worse for wear.

Around me, the others were freaking out, but I tried to dive into Maize's head as I felt Valerio's naturalistic magic reach out to her familiars…

Inky darkness coated every element of my being as I tried to shift, feeling almost frozen in place. I tried to open my mouth, but I seemed to just inhale more darkness, Maize's mind growing consistently more dense with power. Ugly, angry magic that felt so old it had almost a rotting, moldy earth scent to it.

I fucking knew this had to do with Oberon. There wasn't a goddamn doubt in my mind.

"Maize!" I roared out her name as I felt myself sinking further into her consciousness, the threads of dark magic attempting to pull on me. But I was almost untouchable, the magic and poison running through my veins from my mate preventing me from being truly affected. If it wasn't for that, I had no doubt the bastard would be able to pull me under and really fuck with me.

Which made me wonder how the hell it was that he had such a hold on her.

"Maddox?" Maize's voice had me looking around the void anxiously.

When a hand came down on my shoulder, I immediately tensed and turned, only to come face to face with a shaded figure. Not one of my teammates, either. No, this figure was my size and offered me a dark smile as green light began to glow around him.

Oberon.

"What are you doing here, boy?" he asked, amused. "This mind is no longer yours. I would highly suggest you leave."

"Let her go," I warned, my voice laced with venom.

“No. And if you don’t get out of her head, I’ll melt her goddamn brain to the point that she won’t even be able to recognize herself in the mirror. This is my territory not yours. Understand?”

“Maize will never be yours,” I spit out.

Oberon’s chuckle filled the space, and the pressure grew tight and restricting as I let out a groan, falling down to one knee as I brought my hands over my ears. It didn’t help at all, though, and all too soon, I felt my willpower shrink away at the raw fae magic that he flooded the space with. My own power gave out under the assault, and before I had a chance to regain my footing, I was shoved forcefully from Maize’s head.

“What the fuck is happening to him?!” Zed snapped as my eyes flung open. I could feel blood on my lips, my nose and ears stinging from the assault still playing through my brain and body. Maize was trembling in my arms, and chaos was erupting all over. I looked down to find my mate limp and pale in my arms, looking a second away from death itself. It made me furious.

Panic surged through me as I lifted Maize’s body off the ground, blood pooling from where she’d hit her head. She was soaked to the bone, her hair wet and the robe turning crimson from the blood coming off her. I tried to shake her, but she remained limp in my arms. If it wasn’t for her steady heartbeat, I would be afraid she was dead.

“I got shoved out,” I grunted.

“Shit,” Chait muttered, looking at Philip, “Can you get anything?”

“Nothing, and it fucking smells like that magic—”

“Oberon,” I confirmed. “It’s him.

Before any of them had a chance to react, something shook our house, the entire building trembling under the weight of an explosive. Cannon appeared at the door, the younger boys crowding into the room, looking panicked.

“We have a fucking issue,” Cannon said, shaking visibly with the effort of keeping his wolf from forcing a shift.

“What?” Valerio snapped.

“David,” I grit out, realizing that was the odd magic I’d been sensing outside. “David is outside our house, and he’s not alone.”

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EPILOGUE

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MAIZE

“Girl.”

I could practically hear the malice radiating off my father when he used that tone of voice. I could hear the disappointment and anger, as if everything I’d ever done was somehow causing him shame.

Girl. Not Maize, but a girl. A reminder that I didn’t have much of an identity to him.

“Pretty little bug.”

Zagan’s eyes flashed in front of me. I felt true fear radiate through my system, knowing that if he ever got his hands on me again, I wouldn’t walk away from it unscathed. Hell, I may never walk away at all. The bastard had wanted to keep me in a cage since he’d first met me. I had a feeling that being in Zagan’s presence once again would lead me straight to being placed into a torturous cycle of his bullshit.

“Maize.” That was Oberon. I knew that.

“Wake up.”

Why? Why the hell would I wake up for that bastard?

“Wake the fuck up.”

No. He already wanted to take everything from me; I sure as shit wasn’t going to give him this.

“Now.”

The voices continued to taunt me as my head spun, and I could feel my body literally shifting through reality so that I no longer existed outside of my own head. I felt like I was upside down, sideways, and being spun around in circles until I felt so sick that I was going to throw up. When the

rattling that was going through my body, like someone was shaking me, became too much, I managed to open my eyes.

I was instantly greeted with a sight that sent my blood cold.

Oberon.

Except he looked nothing like how he had in my dreams. This was a god, not a man. His stature was massive, and his skin was pale gold with green tattoos that covered every inch of him. His sculpted face and wild, dark hair had him looking exactly like you would imagine a fae god. His eyes were on me as a sinister smile filled his face, the space around us rumbling as if the earth itself was shifting.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I demanded softly.

“Taking what is owed to me,” he mused. “Your father took something of mine, so now I take it from him. You understand, of course, that trying to trick other fae is never a good idea.”

“I am not owed to you,” I spit out.

“Ah, but you are. And if you don’t play my game, you will regret it, Maize.”

“Why is that?” I growled.

Stepping back, the room lit up as bile rose in my throat. Against the wall, everyone I knew and loved—from my men, to my brothers, to even Brielle—stood with vacant stares. A sick shiver went through me as my breathing turned into panicked inhales and exhales.

“If you don’t”—he appeared next to me—“I will destroy them all.”

The terrifying part? I believed him.

His magic swarmed me, and the last thing I was able to hear was his sickening, evil laugh.

I would kill the bastard. I would do anything I could to protect what I had, the people I loved. Even if it meant sacrificing my own life.

I would do it all to free the fae from this monster.

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AFTERWORD

Interested in following Maize on her journey? The last book of the Lost in Fae series is now available for purchase! Make sure to pick up ***Loving Fae*** today!

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